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THE ENGLISH DRAMA

CHAPTER I

FROM THE CHURCH TO THE STEWS

I. THE RELIGIOUS DRAMA

ENGLISH drama began as a labour of love, the product of simple piety. Probably the traditional mysteries—St. George and Dragon mummeries, sword and may-pole dances and the like; games rather than plays, but none the less factors in the formation of the national taste for drama (and so eventually of the drama itself)—originated in pre-Christian, pre-Roman local religious ceremonies. Certainly the earliest English plays proper, quite independently of these folk traditions, were produced in the Church, by the Church, for the (higher) purposes of the Church. History could hardly have repeated itself more pointedly than in the parallel between the evolution of Greek tragedy out of primitive pagan ritual and the gradual emergence of our mystery plays out of the liturgical *tropes* of the early Christian Church. It is no part of our present purpose to pursue the implications of this striking connection between religion and dramatic art, but it is important to emphasise that drama arose in England (as in Christendom generally—for the practice began wherever the Latin tongue was spoken in prayer) as a spiritual, rather than a convivial, feature of communal life. The intrusion of profane influences on its exclusively spiritual properties was an inevitable matter of time. The representation of sacred history (in medieval Europe as in ancient Athens) provided material and

scope for spectacles calculated to attract a congregation, as well on their own merits as from higher motives;* and indeed the Church, catholic in more than a technical sense, would not if it could have kept laughter indefinitely outside its precincts. For all its exacting discipline, there was a schoolboy spirit immanent throughout its personnel, and if, on this analogy, we regard the central ecclesiastical authorities—generally unsympathetic to the development of dramatic activities—as a kind of headmaster, severe and indulgent by turns, we may consider the periodical outbreaks of official “rags” such as the Feast of Fools (some of the excesses of which would probably have shocked the English-speaking habitués of the Folies-Bergères) as no more than natural lapses in the dignity of the school prefect. Under such conditions, the Mystery drama, from a mere amplification of divine service, proceeded by stages to shed its essential mystery, and, as the vernacular English at long last came into its kingdom, characterisation and dialogue (awkwardly, in rhymed verse) began to break through the stiff Latin formulæ, and prepare the way, indeed divers ways, for humanist development. The scope of the productions was gradually extended in respect of (a) subject-matter, from the representation of purely biblical or apocryphal scenes to “miracles” or episodes in the lives of the saints, (b) accommodation, from the confines of the church to adjacent or neighbouring premises, and (c) participants; the admittance of “amateur” laymen supplementing what we may

* A contemporary account of a Resurrection play in the churchyard of St. John's, Beverley, Yorkshire, in 1220, refers (in Latin) to a large crowd assembled, “some for the sake of mere pleasure or wonder, others for the holy purpose of stimulating their devotional feelings” (quoted in Gayley's *Plays of Our Forefathers*).

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without offence describe as the professional ecclesiastical talent available. Plays for which orthodox festivals and saints' days provided the most convenient pretext began to assume an ever-larger place in the life of the people, expanding on occasion into cycles lasting four or five days, under royal patronage. Finally the institution of Corpus Christi Day (the original of our Whitsuntide Bank Holiday) in 1264 led to the inauguration of a definite annual dramatic festival throughout England, as in other countries.

While the plays themselves, throughout the fourteenth century—during which the movement attained its zenith—remained confined to scriptural or sacred subject-matter, the organisation of the productions in the larger cities had come to be taken over by the town-guilds, or local trades unions, each of which would make itself responsible for an episode in a composite cycle comprising, for example, in York, in the year 1415, as many as fifty-four episodes. Of the village and parochial productions we know little save that they were prolific. Clerkenwell appears to have been the original Mecca of London playgoers. Some of the provincial records are fairly detailed, and we have picturesque accounts of the festival performances in Chester and York, doubtless typical of the larger cities generally. Deriving from a form of processional, each show was mounted on a wheeled car of two storeys (technically known as a "pageant"), which, at the end of a performance, moved, in the manner of our progressive games, from one pre-appointed station to the next, wealthy householders bidding against each other (in contributions to the expenses) for the honour of an allocation before their windows. Collected copies of three fairly complete processional cycles—forty-nine York mysteries, twenty-five from Chester, thirty-two from Wakefield—and of one non-processional cycle of forty-two Coventry plays, as well as various isolated pieces from other towns and villages, have been pre-

served out of what must have been a prodigal output. Their authorship is anonymous, and was doubtless in many cases of a composite character. They are full of archaic touches of realism, snatches of comedy mingling not incongruously with their essentially devotional character. Five of the Wakefield plays stand in a class apart as the work of a definitely creative mind—of the first English dramatist. The so-called “second Shepherd’s play” from this cycle (dating from about 1350) exhibits particular originality in its contrivance of a bogus nativity to precede the confrontation of three homely rustics with the wonder of the authentic Virgin and Babe. We are apt to think of our drama as an exclusively metropolitan concern, and of modern provincial repertory as a novel and slightly daring departure from immemorial custom. The Yorkshireman, in the centre of this new movement, by a throw-back to his natural inheritance, may be excused a smile at the Cockney cheek of our patronage.

A tract of the late fourteenth century already sounds a note, too soon to become familiar, pregnant with evil omen for our story. An obscure Wycliffian, anticipating the later Puritans, protests against the demoralising effect of these public exhibitions. Certainly at this period the religious-minded had little cause to lament the growing popularity of the drama. Untainted by commerce, with love interest yet to be discovered, plays were intimately identified with the cause of religion. The ultimate eclipse of the religious drama may indeed be said to be partly attributable to a growing propensity to “rub in” its message—to assume a didactic rôle prohibitive of the emotional appeal which is the drama’s safeguard. This tendency was facilitated by the development, out of mystery-miracle plays, of the Morality: in effect the dramatisation of a sermon by means of personified allegorical abstractions—Experience, Patience, Pride and the like—a development again in common with other Chris-

tian countries, but peculiarly congenial to English taste, as we may judge from the prevalence of allegory in our cultural history from *Piers Plowman* to the vogue of Watts. The more enduring contributions of the Morality are appreciable at a glance. Foremost, its stimulus to the invention of original plots, as distinct from the dramatisation of historical or mythical sagas; next, its system of characterisation by types—a principle that, in comedy at any rate, persisted ostensibly, even to the retention of characteristic names for the *dramatis personæ*, as late as Sheridan (with his Puffs, Surfaces, Backbites, etc.); finally, its simplification of ethical problems, its practice of rewarding virtue, and damning, while somehow endearing to us for all time, the Vice (part stage villain, part clown), who established himself as perhaps the most popular figure on both Tudor and Elizabethan stages, achieving a kind of transfiguration in Iago, and found to this day, sans humour, swaggering along the trail of his latter-day Lyceum glories. Its artistic possibilities it would ill become the countrymen of Bunyan to decry, and we have at least one example of its power and beauty on the stage when handled with discretion and a degree of subtlety. *Everyman* (before 1495, whether we accord priority to the English or the Dutch version) is in the genuine tradition of tragedy, true to its genesis out of the Church as a specifically religious mystery, a matter of communion between man and his Maker. In a sense it is the last English play in that tradition, or at least the last pre-Victorian Play for Puritans. The Morality, in its historical relation, is important as marking a definite parting of the ways. One road inclined upwards to *Everyman* and ended there: the other, by an easy descent from the "moral interlude" to the "merry interlude," led to *Ralph Roister Doister* and thence along a hundred and one fruitful primrose paths.

The Mystery-Miracle drama declined to a slow death

as a result of the Reformation. The Morality as such was killed more abruptly by excess of zeal arising out of the same spiritual upheaval. Under the fillip of the frenzied religious controversies of the Tudor régime it degenerated into a mere vehicle for doctrinal propaganda. The temptation to confute the enemy publicly and authoritatively, as in *The Three Laws* (1538), through the mouthpiece of a Christian Faith, who does not mince his words—*

“ In no case follow the ways of Reginald Pole,
To his damnation he, doubtless, playeth the fool ”

—was more than the human nature of an ardent and gifted theologian could resist. The theologian in question, “ bilious ” Bishop Bale (1495-1563), for all that the five surviving specimens of his twenty-two plays exhibit considerable dramatic sense, was hardly a “ natural born mountebank,” and could not stave off the extinction of this early discussion-drama. The extension of the field of discussion to civil politics (a necessary consequence of the new inter-dependence of Church and State) hastened the inevitable end. To find a counterpart to *Respublica* (1553) with its “ Oppression (*alias* Reformation),” “ Avarice (*alias* Policy),” its plain-speaking People, and its dictatorial if unproletarian Nemesis, we must turn to Soviet Russia, where the uses of this species of drama have been officially explored and exploited. *Respublica* appeared in the “ First Year of the Most Prosperous

* Leaving nothing to chance, the author appends to the printed play the following concise directions as to “ the apparelling of the six vices, or fruits of Infidelity: Let Idolatry be decked like an old witch, Sodomy like a monk of all sects, Ambition like a bishop, Covetousness like a pharisee or spiritual lawyer, False Doctrine like a Popish doctor, and Hypocrisy like a grey friar.”

Reign of Queen Mary." In the first year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth a royal edict prohibited dramatic treatment of "either matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale." We may find something sinister in this initiation of dramatic censorship, or—with our eyes still on Russia—we may smile at the naïveté of a ruler who was content to suppress counter-revolutionary propaganda without attempting to utilise the growing resources of dramatic publicity for her own political ends. The historical fact—likewise, for what it is worth, the so-called Elizabethan drama—remains.*

II. THE SECULARISATION OF THE STAGE

We have been following the development of the "legitimate" English stage. It here becomes necessary to glance aside at the sister institution, "variety," the origin of which extends to a considerably remoter past and, by bar sinister, to a highly distinguished connection. The pedigree of the modern music-hall may, indeed, be traced as far back as the great classical drama of Athens, through its degenerate Roman offshoot. In the twilight of the ancient world, when tragedy had declined into ballet or *pantomime*, and comedy into the obscene buffoonery called miming, our friend the free-lance *artiste* made his first bow; and he emerged out of the ruins of that old world, still smiling, to "keep the pot boiling" throughout the dark ages, contriving, whether singly or in small troupes, to earn more kicks than halfpence in an endless tour of the European road. In medieval

* For convenience, the term "Elizabethan" will be employed frequently in the pages that follow, to denote an epoch which extended roughly down to the Civil War, comprising the reigns of James I. and Charles I. as well as that of Elizabeth.

England we find him hob-nobbing with the native minstrel, equally fallen on evil days, casual protégés of the sporting nobility, bugbears of the "highbrow" prelatry, hail-fellow-well-met of town and countryside. For an adequate consideration of the possible influence of the "turns" of these and sundry other independent "outsiders" on the technique of drama, the reader must refer to the encyclopædic *The Medieval Stage* of Sir E. K. Chambers. We are here concerned with the definite and tremendous social effect of the absorption of the more enterprising of these strolling players into the developing art of the theatre; for as morality superseded miracle in popular favour, individual players here and there would lend an expert hand, until later, interludes becoming ever more common, whole bodies of professionals, often under distinguished patronage, took the plunge, with consequences which, for good or evil, completely revolutionised the status of drama. The outlawry of all unlicensed "Fencers, Bearewardes, Comon Players in Enterludes and Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron or other honorable personage of greater Degree" as "Roges Vagaboundes and Sturdy Beggars," in the year 1572, illuminating as it is for our purposes, was in effect hardly more than an incident in the long ding-dong warfare between these old stagers and the civic authorities. Of more radical significance was the resultant clean-cut breach between the dramatists and a body that, having conceived and given birth to the English drama—a matter of mutual advantage—was for three centuries and more to set its countenance and its influence against plays in any shape or form. That body, the Church, stands as a symbol for the vast middle-class population for whom, throughout the period under discussion, the study of the Bible and a resultant preoccupation with the problems of good and evil provided an interest at least as intense, if

not as ostentatious, as the craze for drama. When we allude to the "national drama" of Elizabethan England, we should remember that it was never wholly representative of the subjects of the Tudor and Stuart régimes. Of the Puritans and Puritanism it spoke with no little feeling. It never spoke *for* the movement derided under that designation—a movement that, working obscurely behind the scenes, was yet powerful enough in its own time to produce a Milton and a Bunyan, as well as an Oliver Cromwell.

The emancipation of drama from its religious or ethical purpose was proceeding by degrees, before the combined effect of the extinction in bathos of the didactic morality, and the invasion of the professional actor, precipitated the tendency, sharply dividing the rival camps. The period of transition is marked in the work of a group of men associated with Sir Thomas More, whose personal enthusiasm for the budding secular art* was aptly celebrated some fifty years later in the biographical play bearing his name (more famous for the three pages of a unique manuscript copy now generally believed to be in the handwriting of Shakespeare). Foremost among these pioneer playwrights was John Heywood (1497-c. 1580), whose lively mind was doubtless stimulated by familiarity with the *soties* or farces of the contemporary French authors (represented at their best in the world-famed *Maître Pathelin*), as well as by the spirit of Chaucer. His *Play of the Wether* and *The Foure P's* (palmer, pardoner, 'pothecary and pedlar), while full of fun, are, as neo-moralities, formally edifying and long-winded. "*A mery play between Johan Johan the Husbande, Tyb his wyfe, and Sir Jhan the preest*"

* And let us remember that this great Englishman—the author of *Utopia*—was to die (in 1535) a martyr in the cause of enlightenment, himself a figure in the true sacred tradition.

(attributed to him) shows more clearly which way the wind is blowing. It is alike a-moralising and a-moral. Henry Medwall's earlier play *Fulgens and Lucrez*, written probably before the close of the fifteenth century, is actually the first conventionally "romantic" play known to us, but as it was only brought to light by chance in 1919, it is possible that some missing link will ultimately displace it from that precedence. Its story is borrowed, directly or indirectly, from one of the Italian humanists.

Other external influences were beginning to complicate the development of our comedy. The recovery of the twelve lost plays of Plautus (1427) had, by repercussion from the Continent, produced something of a vogue for translations and crude adaptations from the Latin in pedagogic circles. The anonymous author of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1550) carried the process a stage further, by adapting the Latin form, with its elaborate development of plot, to a simple and racy comedy of English rural life, in the spirit of *Johan Johan*, to be followed a year or two later by Nicholas Udall (1505-1556) with a second notable achievement in this genre, *Ralph Roister Doister*. The former play was produced at Christ's College, Cambridge, the latter (probably) by the boys of Eton, of which school Udall was for seven years Headmaster. Whence, perhaps, the absence from *Roister Doister* of the coarseness which in *Gammer Gurton* we find present *ad libitum*, and which we must expect to find, sometimes *ad nauseam*, in the popular comedy developed out of the form and spirit of these two pieces. In both alike, the traces of the old Morality have been all but obliterated. Much of the characterisation is fresh (a good deal is conventional), but the dialogue is constrained in the unwieldy rhymed metre from which as yet no master's hand had risen to deliver our comedy. The creator of the first dramatic prose style, John Lyly, was born prob-

ably in 1554, possibly the same year that saw the production of *Roister Doister*.

Academic circles and (by some queer association) the Inns of Court had by this time become veritable hives of dramatic industry. While one group was experimenting with Terence and Plautus, another with equal zest applied itself to the formidable task of making an English tragedy out of Seneca. An English tragedy divorced from its religious associations and married to a corpse was hardly an auspicious foundation for fruitful activity. It was soon found desirable to gild the pill (if we may vary the metaphor) with a coating of romantic treacle, and the coating became thicker as the taste for treacle in that form developed into a craving. Purists put up a fight for the pill, the whole pill, and nothing but the pill, claiming for it the properties of Aristotle's recipe for a spiritual purgative. The public was not interested in Aristotle and continued to swallow the new concoction, which, known as Tragi-comedy, was gradually discarding every pretence of fidelity to the cause enshrined in the classic unities of time, space and action. *Gorboduc* (1562), the joint-work of Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, is actually the earliest extant specimen of this form of dramatic exercise, and has accordingly been hailed as the first English tragedy. It also furnishes the earliest example of how blank verse ought not to be written. We might describe it as the first appearance of "Savonarola Brown" in English letters. Of the disciples of Norton and Sackville the name is Legion. Shakespeare was not among them.

Towards the end of the fifteen-sixties and throughout the seventies, monstrosities by tragi-comedy out of Seneca, with their garrulous ghosts, their extravagances of rhetoric, their excruciating platitudes and their fantastic horrors, became the rage, not only in the halls of the classes educated up to their preten-

sions, but also among the general populace whose taste for drama was moving with the times and adjusting itself to the new conditions. The accommodation of the rapidly multiplying troops of players (nominally attached to some Honorable Personage of the requisite degree) who catered for this public, presented a problem to the actor-manager—if we may so call him—as well as to the municipal authorities. *Al fresco* performances in public inn-yards with their surrounding galleries had served well enough in the days of the Miracles and the earlier Interludes; but the new kind of play demanded more scope, and, moreover, attracted a new kind of audience whose mood was not exactly calculated to enhance the inn-keeper's reputation. On the other hand, the new kind of play was highly congenial to the old kind of stage, the projecting rostrum, whence with adequate material for rant and physical violence, the actor could conveniently address himself to the business of putting the fear of bloody tyrants—or, alternatively equipped, insinuating obscenity—into the surrounding assemblage. "Wyll not a fylthye playe wyth the blast of a trumpette sooner call thyther a thousande than an houres tolling of a bell bring to the sermon a hundred?" thundered the preacher (John Stockwood) at Paul's Cross on August 24, 1578. He was referring to an unobtrusive but specially constructed circular enclosure around the first fixed apron-stage, styled simply The Theatre, that had, some years earlier, slipped casually into the routine of London life.

III. HARBINGERS OF SHAKESPEARE

From this point we become more interested, perhaps, in tracing early intimations of Shakespeare than in following the development of the drama generally. The same year in which Stockwood's

denunciation of The Theatre shook the air, John Lyly published his *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, prior to launching upon the stage his "euphuistic" drama, from which the first great manner of Shakespeare derived its impulse and no little of its art. Lyly was about twenty-five at this time. It is noteworthy that the immediate predecessors of Shakespeare, the cluster of writers with whose enterprise we are now concerned (Lyly, Peele, Greene, Marlowe, Kyd) flash across the scene as young men, and (apart from Lyly) as a group of young men, producing their characteristic work much as, of recent times, successive coteries have been responsible for movements like impressionism, futurism, vorticism, etc. Lyly, a dilettante of genius, stands aloof from and, in a sense, above the group. Born a decade before Shakespeare, he survived till 1606, although his creative output appears to have ceased after 1591 when he was thirty-seven. Kyd, Greene and Peele, all born about 1558, died at the ages of thirty-six, thirty-four and forty-one respectively. Marlowe (b. 1564) died at twenty-nine. If Shakespeare had written nothing after thirty-six (their average effective age) we should have had no *Hamlet*, probably no *Twelfth Night*, none of the supreme plays—and there would have been a different tale to tell. Marlowe was twenty-four when his *Doctor Faustus* was given, and he wrote *Edward the Second* (his last and most satisfying play) at an age when Shakespeare was not ashamed to identify his name with *Titus Andronicus*. The ways of genius are beyond calculation, but it is only fair to the memory of men who gave so much more to the world than they got from it, that these facts should be remembered.

This band of young enthusiasts, with some of whom Shakespeare was later to associate, were, with the exception of Kyd, all University men. That does not mean, as probably it would mean to-day, that their parents belonged to the well-to-do classes. The

Universities were founded for the sons of poor men, and in the sixteenth century the wealthy undergraduate was still the exception rather than, as now, the rule. Lyly was *persona grata* in Court circles: Marlowe was the son of a Canterbury shoemaker. There seems to have been, however, no lack of camaraderie (or, for that matter—as Shakespeare was to learn—of snobbishness) among the University wits, and indeed a glorious time they must have had in their undergraduate days, savouring the late fruits of the Renaissance as they were passed from one centre of learning to the next. A very different manner of career awaited them in the university of life. What does that matter to us? Lyly gave us eight plays, one (*Campaspe*) more or less historical, another (*Mother Bombe*) more or less realistic, three of them more or less pastoral, all more or less allegorical. His main contribution to English drama was a prose style, Italianate in origin, compound of the verbal quibbles, puns and allusions of a subtle intellect not very fastidious, but refined by an ear for word-music: what we should call art for art's sake.

STELLIO: Riscio, my daughter is passing amiable, but very silly.

RISCIO (*his servant*): You meane a foole, sir.

STELLIO: Faith, I implie so much.

RISCIO: Then I applie it fit: the one shee takes of her father, the other of her mother: now you may be sure she is your owne . . .

STELLIO: Dost thou thinke she tooke her foolishnesse of mee?

RISCIO: I, and so cunningly, that she took it not from you.

STELLIO: Well, *quod natura dedit, tollere nemo potest*.

RISCIO: A good evidence to prove the fee simple of your daughter's follie.

STELLIO : Why?

RISCIO : It came by nature, and if none can take it away, it is perpetuall.

STELLIO : Nay, Riscio, shee is no naturall foole——

and so on. It is the idiom in which *Love's Labour's Lost* is steeped, and to which Shakespeare resorts throughout his early works, and here and there in the later ones. Its influence did not stop there, but has persisted in our comedy dialogue, to be echoed as late as in the affectations of Oscar Wilde (to be superseded eventually, but not finally, by the clean cut and thrust of Shavian plain English). The plays themselves are mere pretexts for these architectonics of language, classical in form (in so far as they have any form), an incoherent complex of satire and sycophancy in matter; but, with their occasional lyrics (another feature adopted by Shakespeare), they were found irresistible by the best minds of the day, to which they were addressed. Lyly's associates were not so particular. Among the surviving plays of Peele we find a mythological, probably satirical *Arraignment of Paris*, a promising *Edward the First*, a romantic-biblical *David and Bethsabe*, and an exquisite romantic-fantastic-pastoral *Old Wives' Tale*. They contain occasional bursts of felicitous imagery legitimately comparable to the poetic touch we call Shakespearean. Greene, in a *Scottish History of James the Fourth* and a bucolic *History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, developed the technique of the old horseplay comedy and humanised characterisation, particularly the characterisation of women. He was the first English dramatist to give us what might be described as one of Nature's ladies, and, through her agency, a romance that is not an insult to the modern intelligence. Shakespeare was the second. A collaboration between Lyly and Greene might have given us a comedy of the quality of *As you Like It*.

Kyd made history with a first-class thriller, *The Spanish Tragedy*, wherein, besides supplying the last word in obnoxious ghosts, and arranging no less than ten violent deaths, he contrived as *pièce de résistance* the spectacle of the hero biting his tongue out and flinging it from him with a gesture. He also wrote a play (unfortunately lost) called *Hamlet*, which seems to have interested Shakespeare. Kyd and Marlowe, between them, created "Shakespearean" blank verse.

Marlowe's individual service cannot be so summarily defined. His blank verse is relatively a detail. He first imported genius into English drama. That genius we cannot measure, but of its quality we can say this: no man before or since had more profoundly in him the stuff of tragedy—infinite aspiration combined with an insatiable thirst for truth. Fearless in thought as the mariners of Elizabethan England in action, his very heart's blood is in *Dr. Faustus* (incidentally the first piece of self-portraiture in English imaginative literature), the man who sold his soul to the devil not, as the mob would see it, for vulgar voluptuousness, but, as Goethe was apt to recognise, for a power that pertains essentially to the ends of evolution:

"Shall I make spirits fetch me what I please,
 Resolve me of all ambiguities,
 Perform what desperate enterprise I will?
 I'll have them fly to India for gold . . .
 I'll have them read me strange philosophy,
 And tell the secrets of all foreign kings. . . ."

and later (a revealing and pathetic afterthought):

"I'll have them fill the public schools with silk
 Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad."

In the age of Æschylus, Marlowe would have been a heretic perhaps, but a heretic after the manner of Euripides, master none the less of a tragedy that

ministered, as a matter of course, to the spiritual development of the community at large. In a very different theatre, Marlowe received credit for his "mighty line" (a mere instrument), and, for the tragic genius in him, was, as he is still by many, dismissed as a notorious atheist. *Autre temps, autre mœurs.*

One would suppose that this galaxy of dramatic adventurers, turned loose in London on the resources of their proved wits, might have had successful careers for the asking. Certainly there was no lack of employment for their pens. Plays had caught on with a vengeance. There was money in plays. And there was competition for that money. The theatre, called into being by the activities of their predecessors, had, in its turn, given birth to a veritable monster, that now lured them into a seething vortex, at the peril of their souls. James Burbage, who had built the original Theatre circumspectly in the fields of Shoreditch (outside the jurisdiction of the civic authorities), appears himself, as our first actor-manager, to have been no better and no worse than the run of genial despots who follow in his wake to-day. A rival impresario, Philip Henslowe, pawnbroker by vocation, was the man who really made the pace in the new industry. Establishing his Rose Theatre, without any false modesty, within the liberty of the Clink, on the Surrey or Bank side of the Thames (the quarters of the old stew-houses), alongside amphitheatres devoted to the mysteries of bear- and bull-baiting, he set himself, in association with Edward Alleyn, to make this traditional haunt of impious pleasure-seekers the spiritual home of English drama. He was so far successful that Burbage, migrating from Shoreditch in 1599, put up his Globe Theatre beside the Rose, drawing thither all those who may have wished to attend first productions of Shakespeare's greatest plays. Actors and poets alike were enlisted in a furious

campaign to "keep the pot boiling"—by fair means or foul. Most of the numerous plays produced under these conditions, and known to us only (if as much as) by name, were probably as little worth preserving on their merits as most of the successes of the contemporary commercial drama, and we may consider ourselves amply compensated for their loss by the chance survival of the actual Diary kept by Henslowe between the years 1592 and 1609, which throws abundant light as well upon his motives in calling the tune as upon his methods of paying the piper. A sensational plot (for preference, a familiar one from Bible or history, with a strong love interest), butchery for tragedy, bawdery for comedy, these were the simple rules of the dramatic Stews in which the University wits, among the other hacks, were thrown indiscriminately to the scum of the city. In the soil of the Rose—no bed of roses—Marlowe pushed upwards, blaspheming, only to be cut down in his heyday. Greene, a year before him, had died theatrically cursing the theatre and all its filthy works and workers, including an "upstart crow beautiful with our feathers, that with his *tyger's head, wrapt in a player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse, as the best of you; and being an absolute *Johannes Factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country." William Shakespeare, guilty of a line: "Oh Tiger's heart wrapt in a woman's hide" (from the third part of *Henry VI.*), aged twenty-eight, had come to London, six years earlier (in 1592), to make good, it would seem, after a not very auspicious opening to his career at Stratford-on-Avon. From holding horses outside Burbage's old theatre (according to tradition) he had become a Jack-of-all-trades under Henslowe,* making himself

* To desert him mysteriously and join Burbage in a co-operative venture when the spirit moved him.

useful as actor and play-tinker, making himself agreeable to aristocratic patrons who might be useful to him, and in his spare time, presumably, making himself familiar with the ways of the world, when he was not experimenting with his pen. He kept his head, and he made good in his own time. Greene lost his head and succumbed in hysterics. Marlowe died of a chance stab in a tavern brawl. We may at least surmise that, but for this stroke of bad luck, his genius would have carried him undefiled out of the mire as Shakespeare was carried. Of his art Henslowe certainly got more than he bargained (probably haggled) for. Any journalist can pander to the baser passions. Marlowe pandered to them for a living, with his tongue in his cheek (in *The Jew of Malta*), with his soul transfigured (in patches of *Tamburlaine*, in *Dr. Faustus*, in *Edward II.*). The atmosphere of Henslowe's theatre never extinguished the flame of his aspiration, nor stifled his terrific imagination, nor disturbed the swell of his utterance, nor could it prevent that sudden outburst, amidst the hectic braggadocio of *Tamburlaine*, of a solemn, tremendous and unalterable conviction:

“ If all the pens that ever poets held
 Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
 And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,
 Their minds and muses on admired themes;
 If all the heavenly quintessence they distil
 From their immortal powers of poesy,
 Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
 The highest reaches of a human art;
 If these had made one poem's period,
 And all combined in beauty's worthiness,
 Yet should there hover in their restless heads
 One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
 Which into words no virtue can digest.”

Whether Marlowe would have achieved success personally is, perhaps, beside the point. He saw to it

that English drama made good. As a man, he is sufficiently honoured for us in Shakespeare's affectionate tribute to his "dead shepherd" (*As You Like It*, Act III., Scene 5). And Shakespeare knew.

CHAPTER II

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO POLITE SOCIETY

I. SHAKESPEARE'S PLACE

To reflect that not much more than three decades elapsed between the relatively barbaric *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1566) and *Hamlet* (c. 1601) gives one a sense of wonderment such as might have been experienced fifty years ago at the idea of a human being traversing the Atlantic in thirty-six hours. A kind of wireless-electric mental energy was evidently at work throughout renascent Europe, but all our learned explanation, plausible up to a point, of this influence and that inspiration, does not really amount to much more than a recording of the circumstance that the kiss of the Prince *did* in fact awaken the Sleeping Beauty. At the back of History is always the Fairy Tale.

Perhaps the outstanding practical significance of Shakespeare's achievement lies in his establishment—in a sense, his rescue—of the respectability of the drama as a profession, as well as an art. In the hands of the pedants, a certain literary dignity had attached to it. Reduced to the level of an opposition side-show to the bear-garden, there would seem to have been nothing to prevent its degradation to the status at which it reposed (for it could sink no lower) in the latter days of the Roman Empire. Shakespeare was not to become the Shakespeare of the class-room and of the literary society without incredibly hard work and irresistible force of character.

We like to think of the "spacious days" as a time of happy-go-lucky *joie de vivre*. We remember the glorious exploits of Raleigh and Drake, the defeat of

the Armada, the brilliant social pageant, the genius of Merrie England. There was another side to the picture :

“Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill :
Tired with all these——”

And, abruptly, Shakespeare would round it off with a banal compliment to his friend and patron, grit his teeth, and proceed to write his play.

The most comprehensive study of Shakespeare's life and work, in the opinion of the present writer, is that of the late Georg Brandes.

Of the facts of his life, “all we know with any degree of certainty is that he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, married and had children there; went to London, where he commenced as actor, and wrote poems and plays; returned to Stratford, made his will, died, and was buried.”* There is no man that ever lived of whom quintessentially we know more, from whose intimate personal experience (whether actual or imaginative matters not a whit) more is to be learnt. Already in his first “original” play (*Love's Labour's Lost*, c. 1592), he has noted the fallacy in the then-fashionable philosophy of taking life for granted.

* George Steevens.

“ . . . the world's large tongue
Proclaims you for a man replete with mocks . . .
To weed this wormwood from your fruitful brain . . .
You shall this twelvemonth term from day to day
Visit the speechless sick. . . .
 . . . and your task shall be
With all the fierce endeavour of your wit
To enforce the pained impotent to smile.”

In the earliest of his "refined" comedies (*As You Like It*, c. 1599) he warns us against the other extreme. There is a point at which earnestness becomes ridiculous—it is marked by "the melancholy Jacques"; and the lesson is pressed home in the succeeding comedy (*Twelfth Night*), wherein Olivia and Orsino are seen to have grown morbid through taking life too seriously. And so we may trace Shakespeare's progress or reaction from phase to phase—through *Hamlet* to *Timon*, and out of that *cul de sac*, till "At last"—to follow the imaginary apostrophe of a young poet confronted with the master at New Place, Stratford-on-Avon, in 1616, the year of his death—"in *The Tempest* I watch you making peace with your fellows, forgiving them their evil, and looking out on the world with a lantern of wonder in your hand." We know Shakespeare in relation to how many other things: his country and its history, great ambitions and mean ambitions, nature and art. We know the man in him, but, in addition—and it is this which lifts him above his fellows, so that when we speak of Elizabethan drama, we tacitly exclude the thirty-six odd plays in which this unique Elizabethan will live for ever—we know the God in him. There are moods in which, as a loyal man of the theatre, he is as airily facetious at the expense of the official enemy—in the

"ragging" of Malvolio, for instance—as Ben Jonson or Fletcher, or the anonymous author of that scathing satire *The Puritan*, at one time attributed to him. There are other moods—the mood of Brutus, moods of Hamlet ("Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things . . ."), and of Prospero, moods in which a humble man follows the light of his conscience, and has love for all other men. That light and that love—impersonal things—raise him above his own multiform—now Pagan, now Pantheist—personality. And from this standpoint, finding a fitness in the tradition that in his latter days he entertained a Puritan preacher at his own home at Stratford, we may esteem it his especial distinction, alone among his fellow-pariahs from the Church, to have returned good for evil, to have given us the essential tragedy as well as the comedy and the history of the world, of the two worlds, we live in.

Of all but universal appeal (Tolstoy, for one, was insensible to it), responsive at one or another of his "periods" to practically every perceptible nuance in the gamut of human nature, he developed the English language, in verse from Marlowe, in prose from Lyly, to attain a mastery without parallel in either medium, to express a vaster and a deeper and a richer spirit than has issued from any other mind in any art.

We may "ask and ask," analyse and reanalyse, classify (so far as we are able to classify) his technical devices, admiring this masterly preparation for a *scène à faire* or that infinitely subtle effect of characterisation, marvelling at his inexhaustible resources for holding the spectator's interest, and, when all is said, and we have noted every brick in the mighty edifice, the fabric of his vision is not "melted into air."

Shakespeare's place in our drama need not detain us.

II. BEN JONSON, HIS

"I remember, the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing (whatsoever he penned) he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been, would he had blotted a thousand."—"RARE" BEN JONSON (1573-1637).

Nowadays it may seem strange that a mere mortal could have pretended to the rank of Shakespeare's rival in any capacity. As dramatists, it would be patently ridiculous to make a comparison between the author of *King Lear* and the author of *The Silent Woman*, although we may concede that *The Silent Woman* was probably as far above the powers of any other dramatist of that time as it is below the standard of Shakespeare at his best.* As a personality, Ben Jonson was almost certainly the more successful, the more winning of the two men. He was what we should call a "character." Shakespeare might be loved by the discriminating in his day as in ours, but Jonson was universally felt, even when he was feared, as a dynamic force, a person to be reckoned with. And he was good company. We recognise him as the spiritual ancestor of Dr. Johnson and of our own G. K. Chesterton, autocrats of the Coffee House and the Bar of Fleet Street as he was of the Mermaid, a little to the north-east. His person-

* To preserve our perspective of the period, we should remember that not only was Jonson, in the estimation of many besides himself, the better artist of the two, but that yet another poet, whose rivalry would appear from the Sonnets to have given Shakespeare sleepless nights, has been identified with that lesser Jonson (dramatically speaking), George Chapman.

ality, like theirs, stands four square against all vicissitudes of fortune—pedant *cum* volcano *cum* wit *cum* creator—on a basis of that essential integrity that we call character. In Dr. Johnson's day, social life was an end in itself, and the force of his personality achieved the paradox of making his daily conversation undying. Chesterton has never really troubled to break himself of the habit of journalistic controversy, but once, by chance—to amuse Shaw, it is said—he wrote a play, and *Magic* is not quite like any other play, while it is uncannily like G. K. Chesterton: it is pedantry made palatable by wit and imagination and a sort of bad temper. In that respect it is like the plays of Ben Jonson. Only to Jonson playwriting became second nature, and the vehicle for conveying the full force of that enragement at the follies of the rest of mankind that made him the terror of his age, and would have made him the pet of ours. He delighted to talk about himself—which is the reason we have so much more information about him than about Shakespeare—and a good talker never had a better subject. He was in turn bricklayer and soldier (seeing active service) before a zest for learning, irrepressible high spirits and poverty (with "a shrew, though honest," as he calls his wife, and children to maintain) drove him inevitably into the charmed circle of Henslowe's hacks. In 1598 he fought a fellow-actor in Hoxton Fields, and, profiting from Marlowe's fate, took care to kill his man in self-defence, to Henslowe's intense annoyance (apparently the deceased was the more useful servant). The consequent branding of "T" (for Tyburn) on his left thumb, and the forfeiture of his (probably negligible) goods, appear in no wise to have curbed his inveterate pugnacity. After the success of his first characteristic comedy, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598), he threw his whole weight into a furious literary quarrel or *poetamachia*, the

whys and wherefores of which have never to this day been rightly determined, but which provoked him to waste three years' creative work on three massive controversial plays, of which only one, *The Poetaster*, a marvellous reconstruction of the Roman Augustan age, is just not ruined by its copious unintelligible scurrilities. As with Shakespeare, his personality pervades his work: unlike Shakespeare, he never rises above it—save in occasional lyrics, and in the fragmentary pastoral, *The Sad Shepherd*, which he wrote near his end. Throughout the main body of his work the style is consistently the man. For the conventional, deferential epilogue, he substituted a more robust note:

“ By —— 'tis good, and if you like 't, you may,”

and this sturdy, uncompromising spirit lends an English gusto to his prose, that sweeps away the cobwebs and the continental fal-lals of euphuism:

CLERMONT: Why, what should a man do?

TRUEWIT: Why, nothing: or that which, when 'tis done, is as idle. Hearken after the next horse-race or hunting-match, lay wagers, praise Puppy, or Peppercorn, Whitefoot, Franklin; swear upon Whitemane's party; speak aloud that my lords may hear you; visit my ladies at night, and be able to give them the character of every bowler or better on the green. These be the things wherein your fashionable men exercise themselves, and I for company.

A little toning-down, and we are in the stylised plain speech of the later Comedy of Manners. The Comedy of Humours—Jonson's darling invention—in principle as well as in form, was its parent, and, some may think, its better. It was perhaps not quite as novel as it appeared in his own fond eyes. Strip

the old Morality of its ecclesiastical atmosphere, and you have the scheme in embryo—the interplay of types representing conflicting elements in human nature. In Jonson's philosophy, Every Man is the subject of a pathological bias that determines his addiction to one or other of the common human weaknesses. From this satirical standpoint it remained for him to contrive appropriate settings in which assortments of caricatured "humours" might be released for the edification of a world of ignor-amuses. After great straining and labouring—such labour that one is almost hypnotised into admiring an abortion like *Every Man Out of His Humour*—he achieved by inspiration a sort of crystallised brilliance in three masterpieces, *The Fox* (1605), *The Silent Woman* (1609) and *The Alchemist* (1610). The sheer virtuosity of each of these dizzy flights of comic fancy almost takes one's breath away, but elates one in the process, unless the nerves quail before an absoluteness of comedy that might in these days be mistaken for rank inhumanity. Here and there we are reminded of Aristophanes, but in the perfect balance of the action flowing steadily from divers points to be united and carried in one torrential sweep towards the catastrophe, they are not only unsurpassed, they stand in a class apart. *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) is Jonson's second best, realistic where the big three are wildly fantastic, but conspicuously superior to the numerous similarly Hogarthian pictures of London manners executed by minor Elizabethans, and consummate in its comic portraiture, thanks to a flexibility of language that marks the culminating point of its author's stylistic development.

Enter ZEAL-OF-THE-LAND-BUSY.

DAME PURECRAFT: O Brother Busy! Your help here, to edify and raise us up in a scruple: my daughter Win-the-fight is visited with a natural disease of

women, called a longing to eat pig. . . . And I would be satisfied from you, religiously-wise, whether a widow of the sanctified assembly, or a widow's daughter, may commit the act without offence to the weaker sisters.

Busy: Verily, for the disease of longing, it is a disease, a carnal disease or appetite, incident to women; and as it is carnal and incident, it is natural, very natural: now, pig, it is a meat, and a meat that is nourishing and may be longed for, and so consequently eaten; it may be eaten; very exceeding well eaten; but in the Fair, and as a Bartholomew pig, it cannot be eaten; for the very calling it a Bartholomew pig, and to eat it so, is a spice of idolatry, and you make the Fair no better than one of the high-places. This, I take it, is the state of the question: a high-place.

The "Humour," be it observed, has undergone a subtle metamorphosis into something very like a human being. Note again the individual note in the Rabbi's relentment.*

Busy: In the way of comfort to the weak, I will go and eat. I will eat exceedingly, and prophesy; there may be a good use made of it too, now I think on' t: by the public eating of swine's flesh, to profess our hate and loathing of Judaism, whereof the brethren stand tax'd. I will therefore eat, yea, I will eat exceedingly.

Not content with comic laurels, the bricklayer-poet, equipped with another kind of formula, historical fidelity, sought to hew his way to the summit of tragedy, producing in *Sejanus* (1603) and *Catiline*

* Zeal-of-the-land-Busy was created exactly fifty years before Molière's *Tartuffe*.

(1611) two monuments of erudition and wasted energy. That way was not open to his will. Certainly he could lay down the law convincingly enough, but in applying it, all too faithfully the pedant stifles the volcano. Tragic exaltation we could never have expected: Jonson had not the *entrée* into that Holy of Holies, nor would he have thought of looking for a key that is to be found only in—the heart of every man in the appropriate “humour.”

The volcano gradually declined in force, but there were minor eruptions almost to the end, chiefly in the form of the Masque, or rather of *libretti* for that exotic entertainment.* Jonson had thrown off some of these *pièces d'occasion* at intervals after the accession of James I., and, with the waning of his dramatic power, was glad to fall back on the reputation they had gained for him—not to speak of the perquisites. In virtual collaboration with Inigo Jones, whose elaborate *décor* provided the major attraction of the show, he finally liberates from almost inveterate inhibition the lyric side of his genius; but, chafing against the misalliance, interrupts his own swan-song to enter into a furious squabble with the scenic artist, remaining intransigent to the end.

We began by quoting Jonson's strictures on the art of his greater contemporary. Let us recall as equally characteristic, that he “had not told posterity” these lamentable truths concerning Shakespeare, but, among other reasons, “to justify mine own candour: for I loved the man, and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any.”

May we not, *mutatis mutandis*, return the honest compliment?

* Imported from Italy in early Tudor days to be cultivated in the hot-house of successive Court *régimes*.

III. THE CAVALIER DRAMA

"Shakespeare apart, was it really an age of great drama? . . . Shakespeare apart, what playwright . . . would compare in point of intellect with half-a-dozen men who are now writing for the stage? Ben Jonson will, of course, be thrust into the breach . . . but a thinker he was not . . . Thus the days of Elizabeth and James present the surprising spectacle of one towering world-genius rubbing shoulders with, and scarcely, if at all, distinguished from, a group of writers . . . deplorably infested with the crudities and brutalities of their period. . . . I do not see how any unprejudiced student can deny that the minor Elizabethan drama . . . is an essentially barbarous product."—(WILLIAM ARCHER, in *The Old Drama and the New*.)

William Archer was, by general consent, the greatest of modern English dramatic critics. He was what the Elizabethans would have called a Puritan. We have been at some pains to give expression to the point of view he represented, because Puritanical sentiment, in some degree, is to-day, as it has been from time immemorial, an element that counts—that counts more than it shows—in England. For close upon a century after the decline of the Restoration Theatre, the body of Elizabethan drama remained under a cloud, alike for the purposes of the study and of the stage. The cloud lifted under Elia's gentle persuasion (in 1808), and a new vogue was fostered in literary circles; but it had hardly extended beyond, despite Swinburne's perfervid advocacy, before a new reaction set in against what William Archer called "the Elizabethan legend." That reaction is still operative.

The profuseness of the minor Elizabethan drama positively bewilders the unprejudiced student who is fortunate enough to appreciate its dramatic quality and its imaginative grandeur. Was it a barbarous age? Ben Jonson was yet a thinker on a colossal scale. We are all of us miserable sinners, or, if you prefer it, deplorably infected with the crudities and brutalities of our animal nature. Even a barbarous product—a lion, for example, or a palm tree—may stimulate the imagination, if it serve no higher purpose. And great drama is always great drama.

Let us make no pretence or apology. Let us name names. *Chapman* (?-1634), *Dekker* (1570 ?-1637 ?), *Middleton* (1570 ?-1627), (*Thomas*) *Heywood* (?-1650 ?), *Fletcher* (1579-1625), *Massinger* (1583-1640), *Beaumont* (1584-1616), *Tourneur* (1575 ?-1626), *Webster* (1580 ?-1625 ?), *Ford* (?-?)—all these men, and some half-dozen more, bequeathed, as it were, a deposit of the Elizabethan spirit in a few hundred plays distinguished in general (naturally, in varying degrees) for brilliantly colourful atmosphere, intense psychological interest, fascinating craftsmanship, and, above all, superbly fluent and vivid dialogue. The prospect of compressing even their salient characteristics into the compass of this volume sufficiently brings home to the writer the immensity of their common achievement. To consider the contribution of each man singly and comparatively is out of the question. A kind of impressionistic survey must be attempted with an acute consciousness of its inevitable shortcomings.

Neither Shakespeare nor Jonson was the real leader—even a real representative—of the movement nowadays hardly conceivable apart from their names—a movement that, from its sordid associations in the days of Marlowe, passed rapidly into the forefront of fashionable social activity, becoming increasingly bound up with the gay life of the Court, until, in the

eyes of its Roundhead opponents, it was identified with the whole cause of the monarchy. Shakespeare, as we have seen, was not really an anti-Puritan. Ben Jonson was essentially an intellectual snob. This is not to say that either of them was a prig, or stood socially aloof from his fellows; on the contrary, they participated freely and humanly in the wear and tear of the common life, with its cliques and feuds and its haphazard collaborations; and by allegiance at any rate, Shakespeare, like Jonson, was as thoroughgoing a Royalist as the worst of them. But the really typical Elizabethan, or rather, as we may more fairly call him in retrospect, the complete Cavalier, was as far removed from the sensitive spiritual essence of the one, as he was from the high-horseplay of the other, and it was reserved for John Fletcher, the most prolific as well as the freest (alike from moral and artistic scruples) of the circle, to do fullest justice to the genius that, for good or ill, made England what she once was. Light-hearted and stout-hearted, romantic (in the sense of approving all fair in love and war) by whim, as casually and characteristically matter-of-fact, he rises at the crest of the wave, and rides it triumphantly to its fall. The technique at his finger-ends, he dashes off plays with the sporadic intensity of a Drake embarking on a new exploit in the Western Main, or scotching the Spanish Armada, or (as the case may be) finishing his game of bowls. His forte was the tragi-comedy with no nonsense about it, that, after the decline of Shakespeare's great tragic period, won and for long held the first place in the playgoer's favour. Unlike lesser practitioners in this genre, however, he has no taste for mere sound and fury, never indulges in "sob-stuff" (well, hardly ever), and wears his poetry straightforwardly as he lived. Shakespeare's later and longer blank verse, in his hands, runs often into a bubbling overflow of rhythmic prose, in which, again, we seem to catch

the true accent of the age. If we must call his vices Cavalier vices, let us give due credit to the same national party for his no less conspicuous, though largely unacknowledged, virtues. "Give me dying," cries the Duke in *The Chances*,

"As dying ought to be, upon mine enemy,
Parting with man-kind, by a man that's manly :
Let 'em be the world, and bring along
Cain's envy with 'em, I will on !"

Was the gay Cavalier's philosophy ever more happily expressed? Or more wittily than in this snippet from the same play?

DON FREDERICK: If she be not found we must fight.

DON JOHN: I am glad on 't. I have not fought a great while.

DON FREDERICK: If we dye——

DON JOHN: There's so much money saved in lecherie.

Barbaric, maybe; but in its magnificent response to the eternal challenger, in its frank fearlessness and essential zest for life, does it carry no lesson for us of this generation?

It was a sure instinct that led Fletcher to set so many of his quasi-heroic comedies in the colourful countries of Southern Europe, of Spain in particular. The English cavalier derived no little of his code from the chivalrous Don of the best Habsburg period. Spain at this time was cultivating a drama of her own, with Lope de Vega at the height of his glory, and the great Calderon preparing to put him in the shade. Fletcher, who probably knew the language, helped himself freely from this as from native sources, demonstrating (with Beaumont) in *The*

Knight of the Burning Pestle, that Cervantes' ridicule of the excesses of chivalry was as congenial to English ears as in the home of the original Don Quixote. But in the most vital social relation—his attitude towards his womankind—Fletcher's Englishman was a law unto himself. With all his virile manhood—(and he could hardly be accused of effeminacy) he was anything but a "Sheik." Nor, *per contra*, was his lady a mere Shrieking Sister. We attach, perhaps, the wrong kind of significance, in this connection, to the "moral" of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. We have no warrant for regarding Petruchio's brutal treatment of Katharine—so disconcerting to the devotees of gentle Shakespeare—as illustrating a common or even a recognisable feature of the domestic conventions of the period.* Is not the whole point of the *tour de force* precisely the extravagance of the idea of an Elizabethan shrew submitting to the domination of a mere male? If so, Fletcher rather unkindly skims the cream of the joke in his "dramatic sequel" (as St. John Hankin called his own experiments of this kind), *The Tamer Tamed*, wherein the same Petruchio, embarking on a second marriage, finds his match in "a chaste witty lady" of no uncertain humour:

MARIA: By the faith I have
In mine own noble will, that childish woman
That lives a prisoner to her husband's pleasure,
Has lost her making, and becomes a beast
Created for his use, not fellowship. *

LIVIA: His first wife said as much. .

* In Shakespeare generally, as most commentators have noted, the "hero" cuts a poor figure beside the "heroine," but Shakespeare's women—idealised whether as Cleopatra or Miranda—must have been "caviare to the general."

MARIA: She was a fool,
And took a scurvy course; let her be nam'd
'Mongst those that wish for things, but dare not
do 'em;
I have a new dance for him.

And the hussy is as good as her word, her creator being manifestly unacquainted with that "state of marked social inequality of the sexes" predicated in Meredith's famous Essay as one of the handicaps of the comic poet. Middleton's and Dekker's *Roaring Girl* of Cheapside was drawn from a real character of the period, suggesting that this breezy feminism was at least as likely to have derived from the Gloriana of history as from any poet's imaginings. Fletcher is whole-hearted in the cause, and if his women, like his men, are distinctly aware of their bodies, they are probably no more obsessed with sex than the Victorian *ingénue*, while their manners, which so scandalised Coleridge, may perhaps be set on a par with those of our latest Georgian dramatic models.

We return to Fletcher, to glance off in another direction. A capacious sponge in his absorption of subject-matter, he was equally impartial in his methods of discharging the overflowing fluid-stuff of drama so accumulated. If his work teems with Shakespearean tit-bits, Shakespeare may be said to have returned the compliment by trespassing on his preserves in the tragi-comedies of his last period, as well as by actually collaborating with him in *Henry VIII* and (probably) in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Fletcher was not tied to tragi-comedy, and was game for an experiment at any time in company with any man. He was the collaborator *par excellence*. The half-dozen plays in which he lent a hand to the more sophisticated Beaumont form so matchless a blend that, from their popularity, the legend "Beaumont and Fletcher" was automatically assigned, and has attached ever

since, to the whole of his output,* of fifty odd plays. Four of these joint productions are in the tragic vein, and if we say that, after Shakespeare, they are as great plays and as nearly good tragedies as the limitations of the Elizabethan drama permit, we are using words advisedly, and not necessarily qualifying admiration. In the matter of tragedy, not all the vast possibilities of poetic expression bequeathed by Marlowe, not all the inspiration of Shakespeare's conversion of those possibilities into impossibilities, could compensate for the absence of the soil in which alone, saving miracles, anything essentially justifying the name could be expected to spring. Of this soil, as we have noted, the anti-Theatre party had a monopoly. The principles governing the motivation of the Thames-side drama remained to the end the simple economic laws of demand and supply. The demand was for entertainment, and while the provision of entertainment is consistent as a matter of course with a comedy of any school and any standard, it is by no means as a matter of course consistent with the aim of tragedy, which is spiritual enlightenment. The Elizabethan playgoer had no wish to be spiritually enlightened. The entertainment sought in, and derived from, his tragic drama corresponded at bottom to the attraction of the popular thriller of the present day, with a difference (as between a masterpiece like *The Maid's Tragedy* and the latest Edgar Wallace), that, shall we say, is all but fundamental. It is a difference of taste rather than of temper. Flesh and blood are the principal constituents of the newer as of the older brew. (True tragedy transcends flesh and blood.) The quality of flesh varies in degree of sublimation. The "blood" interest has changed with the years almost beyond identification. An Eliza-

* To find Fletcher in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, one must refer to "Beaumont and Fletcher."

bethan audience, from groundlings upwards, demanded blood for blood's sake—blood neat in physical action, heart's-blood in "sob-stuff," blood in language (which is poetry). It was one of the tricks of the trade of Beaumont, Fletcher and Co., to contrive, as a grand finale to the evening's sensation, a general holocaust of guilty and innocent—this constituting, in their journalese, a "tragic"—in ours, a "Sadistic"—ending. "Sadistic" is certainly nearer the mark. Granted that these are not tragedies, let us give due thanks for the major bloody-ending plays of the minor Elizabethans. We have noticed Ben Jonson's heavy Roman histories in this vein. A similar quality of laboured pedantry mars, for us, the "proud full sail" of the great verse of his disciple Chapman, although his *Bussy D'Ambois* and his two topical plays about the French Duke Byron were great favourites in their day. The serious plays of Beaumont and Fletcher are, of their kind, supreme. If only they could have followed Shakespeare a little further—but the little more . . . and when we come to *Philaster*, which has been compared with *Hamlet*, we are reminded how much it is. The spirit of Shakespeare, indeed, is doomed to walk through the quasi-tragedies of Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger, Middleton, and their followers, with devastating effect. For one first-rate Iago (De Flores in Middleton's *Changeling*) we must suffer how many second-rate Othellos and Brutuses, and corrupt imitations of Viola and Isabella, and echoes of choice passages such as the quarrel-scene from *Julius Cæsar*. The two parts of *The Honest Whore* by Dekker (with incidental assistance from Middleton) stand out with an unaffected tenderness as sharply distinct from the elaborate brilliance of this school as a Pre-Raphaelite from the elegant art of the Pitti Palace. The work is perhaps too uneven to justify the title of masterpiece, but, if we may qualify our own generalisation, we would hail as a unique minor

Elizabethan tragedy a play which perversely does not claim to be more than a romantic comedy.

It is important to bear in mind, when we pass judgment on these plays, that many of the incidents that appear so extravagant to us were suggested by, if not directly founded on, events of current social history. If Seneca was responsible for most of the horrors of the earlier pieces, the Court intrigues of the latter years of Queen Elizabeth—typified in the Essex conspiracy, with its sanguinary dénouement—and the wholesale corruption and depravity of the Stuart ménage furnish facts as hair-raising as any old-world fictions, and conveniently adaptable to the routine of the more picturesque Borgia and Medici palaces. It would seem, indeed, that mere lust and violence, with their train of seductions and adulteries and vendettas, gradually became stale news, and that a popular demand for more novel sensations inspired the subtler shocks of the school associated primarily with the names of Webster, Ford, and Tourneur. It is a far cry from *Titus Andronicus*, with its straightforward rapes and limb-chopping, and its inevitable ghosts, to Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, where the horrors of the madhouse are exploited with every device of ultra-sophisticated Grand Guignol, and Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a variation on the theme of *Romeo and Juliet*, with a brother and sister as the ill-fated paramours. These men achieved a definite intensification of interest, not only by specialising in abnormal vices and crimes, but by a closer approximation to naturalism in their art, which, as art, reaches the high-water mark of the dramatic development of the period. The trial scene from Webster's *The White Devil* remains the perfect poetic idealisation of a sordid *cause célèbre*, of a spectacle as familiar to us as to Webster's contemporaries—a thoroughbred lady arraigned before a masculine court of justice, her woman's wit pitted against all the

resources of the trained intellect, holding her own gamely to the end. The following excerpts may give some idea of the quality of these "decadent" post-Shakespeareans :

MONTICELSO : Stand to the table, gentlewoman.

Now, Signior,

Fall to your plea.

LAWYER : *Domine Judex, converte oculos in hanc pestem, mulierum corruptissimam.*

VITTORIA : What's he?

FRANCISCO DE MEDICI : A lawyer that pleads against you.

VITTORIA : Pray, my lord, let him speak his usual tongue :

I'll make no answer else.

FRANCISCO : Why, you understand Latin.

VITTORIA : I do, sir; but amongst this auditory Which come to hear my cause, the half or more May be ignorant in 't.

FRANCISCO (*to the lawyer*) : Go on, sir.

VITTORIA (*persisting*) : By your favour,
I will not have my accusation clouded
In a strange tongue; all this assembly
Shall hear what you can charge me with.

She gains her point. The lawyer is ordered to change his language.

LAWYER (*furious*) : Well; then, have at you !

VITTORIA : I am at the mark, sir : I'll give aim to you,
And tell you how near you shoot.

He immediately over-shoots the mark, and is glad enough, before long, to give place to the Cardinal.

MONTICELSO : I shall be plainer with you, and point out

Your follies in more natural red and white
Than that upon your cheek. . . .

VITTORIA : Honourable my lord,
It does not suit a reverend Cardinal
To play the lawyer thus—

MONTICELSO : O, your trade instructs your language.
You see, my lords, what goodly fruit she seems;
Yet like those apples travellers report
To grow where Sodom and Gomorrah stood
I will but touch her and you straight shall see
She'll fall to soot and ashes.

VITTORIA : O poor charity!
Thou art seldom found in scarlet.

MONTICELSO : Who knows not how, when several
night by night
Her gates were choked with coaches, and her rooms
Outbraved the stars with several kind of lights;
When she did counterfeit a prince's court
In music, bouquets, and most riotous surfeits?
This whore, forsooth, was holy.

VITTORIA : Ha! Whore! What's that!

MONTICELSO : Shall I expound whore to you? Sure,
I shall;
I'll give their perfect character.

He proceeds to do so forcibly in a matter of twenty-four lines.

VITTORIA : This character scapes me. . . .

MONTICELSO : You know what whore is. Next the
devil adultery
Enters the devil murder.

FRANCISCO DE MEDICI (*weightily*): Your unhappy
husband is dead.

VITTORIA (*who arranged the murder*): O he's a
happy husband :
Now he owes nature nothing.

The gruesome detail of the crime is recalled to her.

MONTICELSO : And look upon this creature was his wife.

She comes not like a widow; she comes armed
With scorn and impudence : is this a mourning habit?

VITTORIA : Had I foreknown his death, as you suggest,
I would have bespoke my mourning.

The tension grows as Vittoria warms to her defence, but the net closes about her. Never for a moment does her magnificent bluff desert her.

MONTICELSO : If the devil
Did ever take good shape, behold his picture.

VITTORIA : You have one virtue left,—
You will not flatter me.

FRANCISCO DE MEDICI : Who brought this letter?

VITTORIA : I am not compelled to tell you.

MONTICELSO : My lord duke (*her paramour*) sent to you a thousand ducats
The twelfth of August.

VITTORIA : 'Twas to keep your cousin (*her murdered husband*)
From prison. I paid use for 't.

MONTICELSO : I rather think
'Twas interest for his lust.

VITTORIA : Who says so
But yourself? If you be my accuser
Pray cease to be my judge : come from the bench.

All her arts and wiles will not avail her. The case is clear. She is sentenced to confinement in a house of convertites.

VITTORIA : A house of convertites ! What's that?

MONTICELSO (*brutally*) : A house of penitent whores.

VITTORIA (*who will have the last word*): Do the noblemen in Rome (*she is a Venetian*)
 Erect it for their wives, that I am sent
 To lodge there?

Can such dialogue be called "an essentially barbarous product"? Is it not, in point of drama, as impressive as, shall we say, the trial scene from *St. Joan*? Always remembering that *St. Joan* is a real tragedy.

Vittoria Corombona, despite her name and her setting, is English to the core, and was presumably recognised as such. We call the play a poetic idealisation. There is a type of mind that must take everything literally, and it may be that even in those days, when imagination was, as it were, second nature, there were people who refused to waste their sympathies on "a lot of foreigners." For their benefit (upon this supposition) the so-called Domestic Tragedy found a place in the repertory. Two plays of this class, *Arden of Feversham* and *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, are among those that from time to time have been ascribed to Shakespeare. Arden might well have been drawn by the hand that created Othello—if Shakespeare had been in the habit of repeating himself. The Domestic Tragedy practically confined itself to the study of bourgeois Othellos and their wives, guilty or innocent. Thomas Heywood, its most distinguished exponent, produced a new kind of sensation with his masterpiece *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, in which the hero-raisonneur, convinced of his wife's infidelity, deliberately refrains from taking the "unwritten law" into his own hands. (As the title of the play indicates, his spouse, anticipating the second Mrs. Tanqueray, did not survive the treatment.) Already we miss the colour, as we recognise the modern cunning, of this embryonic problem play. There is something incongruous, too, in such austere treatment of the plain man and woman of that period.

We are reminded that the Elizabethans, while disregarding the technical rules of classical drama, conformed in general to Aristotle's assertion of one (tragic) law for the nobility, another (comic) for the lower orders.

Comedy is necessarily cruel, but there are limits to its cruelty. The squalid domestic interiors of the lower orders of those days were certainly no laughing matter. The realistic comedy, which flourished from the beginning to the end of the period, and which deals so intimately with the lives of the poor, is notable for its scenes set in places of public resort—in streets and fields and taverns—where private woes could be dissipated in a hectic sociability or drowned in sack. Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* already shows this predilection for the open air in a cleaner and countrified community. Porter's *Two Angry Women of Abingdon* is even more vivid as a portrayal of rustic manners. But London was of course the main inspiration. The doctrinaire comedy of humours might well have evaporated in words, but for its gradual establishment on this *terra firma*. It was a hazardous enterprise to take Ben Jonson as literally as he took himself at his word. Chapman alone of the immediate disciples may be said to have justified his courageous loyalty to his master's opinions; certainly in *All Fools* and *May Day* he reproduced Jonson's formula as brilliantly as in *The Widow's Tears* he aired his own native frenzy of cynicism. But the metropolitan scene drew even Jonson in the end; his superb panoramic view of Bartholomew Fair crowns the achievement of the London group of comedies. Chapman and Marston collaborated with him in the looser composition of *Eastward Ho*, a friendly counter-blast to Dekker's and Webster's *Westward Ho*, and which in turn called forth a *Northward Ho* by the same authors. Dekker, solo, contributed his immortal *Shoemaker's Holiday*, endearing himself to us in a personal sense achieved

by no other of Shakespeare's fellows. In collaboration with Middleton, he further enriched our realistic London comedy with *The Roaring Girl*, already referred to. Middleton, wanting his restraining hand, gave us in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* perhaps a little too much of the seamy side of a good thing. But it seems ungrateful to cavil. These plays give us something more than drama, more than art—they are documents of the first social-historical significance; a potted life of the times. Old London is brought before the mind's eye more vividly than any phono-film could have rendered it. Yet we must note that it was never a mere "slice of life" reproduction; it was a vehicle for the communication of vital satirical ideas.

We seem to have strayed far from Fletcher, but one Elizabethan dramatist leads easily enough to almost any other, and proceeding now to Massinger by way of the curiously impersonal Middleton, it occurs to us that we might as fitly have introduced this great name as one with which Fletcher was associated more frequently if not more fruitfully than with Beaumont. Massinger collaborated with Middleton (and Rowley) in a play *The Old Law*, the theme of which could hardly have been conceived by any of his comrades. We are here lifted above realities into a realm of fantastic ideas; but neither fantasy nor the ideas intrude on the artistically convincing story of a society where the common notion that old fogeys are a nuisance is carried to the logical extreme of simply killing off everybody at a fixed age limit. The simplicity of it is the Massinger touch. No idea seems too extravagant for Massinger to exploit with a straight face, and a persuasive imagination. As a contriver of plots on a gigantic scale, not even Shakespeare can match him, and there is mental meat in those plots. His easy-flowing verse hurries us past the wildest improbabilities, but it is all very stimulating and even enlightening up to a point. He appears himself to have been

possessed of considerable moral courage. He even dared to air his Catholic sympathies in his plays, but artistically he shirks the issue again and again, and nearly every one of his surviving plays* leaves one with a sense of vaguely frustrated purpose, as though he had to make his stories just too good to be serviceable to Truth. But the temptation must have been difficult to resist. He has such wonderful brain-waves: a nightmare vision—some might call it prophetic—of a proletarian revolution (*The Bondman*): a demonstration, forestalling Pirandello, of the relativity of dramatic fact and fiction (*The Roman Actor*): the evocation of the old crusading spirit in the opposition of romantic Christian and picturesque Mohammedan ideas (*The Renegado*): the reflection of the economic-social kaleidoscope through distorted mirrors (*The City Madam*). The most popular of his plays, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, with its superb portrait of Sir Giles Overreach, the profiteer, held the stage well into the nineteenth century. Mr. Archer does not fail to note that Massinger had “a cleaner, saner mind” than some of his contemporaries. And yet, paradoxically, in one play at least, *The Virgin Martyr*, he is guilty of a departure from clean-mindedness which some may hold to be more reprehensible than the frank pornography of the more typical Elizabethans. The play may be described as an essay in that modern speciality, sexual suggestiveness. The offence is aggravated by its origin in a pseudo-religious subject-matter (the martyrdom of St. Dorothea). Fletcher’s pseudo-pastoral, *The Faithful Shepherdess*—so subtly con-

* Unique manuscript copies of a number of Massinger’s plays were, with many others, collected by one Warburton, a *bourgeois gentilhomme* of the middle eighteenth century, whose historic cook appropriated the lot for use as dish covers. Three out of some fifty plays were ultimately recovered.

trived that, had the authorship been anonymous, it might have been accepted at its face value as a naïve plea for chastity—is the only other notable example of this aberration. Both are latish products, presaging the dissolution of a “barbaric” age into the elements of a fine-mannered civilisation.

For as suddenly it had flared up, so, gradually, the flame of drama weakened till it flickered. In James Shirley (1596-1666), the last of the big pre-Civil War dramatists, we find signs of exhaustion and corruption alike in comedy and in the other thing. There are echoes everywhere, and situations that suddenly fall flat. The language is toning down; we may read whole passages of dialogue without being arrested by a single splendid image or striking word-coin. But, indeed, drama itself had become *vieux jeu*. Mr. Ivor Brown, in his *Parties to the Play*, has shown how by a sort of tri-partite see-saw, the failure of the supply of fresh drama automatically raises the status of either actor or producer. We have seen how Ben Jonson, in his old age, had succumbed to the lure of the fashionable Court masque which depended at least as much on the novel contrivances of the scenic artist as on the draw of his lyrical powers, or even of his great name. The drama reduced to this pass is as a Samson shorn of his locks. Its strength has evaporated.

A Samson shorn of his locks, with the Philistine at the gate. Or have the rôles been reversed? The ferociously militant righteousness of the Puritans was surely no Philistine force. The Lord was on their side, in their word as in His deed. The issue had become clearly defined; Cavalier and Roundhead were preparing for the inevitable day, with the theatre as a practical bone of contention between them. The Puritan Prynne, on the appearance (1632) of his *Histriomastix*, a manifesto of prodigious length, denouncing the stage and all its practices, had been punished with a savagery that nothing less than war-

fever could justify. But swiftly the tables were to be turned. On the outbreak of the Civil War, under party pressure that they could not have resisted if they would, Parliament proceeded to suppress the theatre under penalties which were correspondingly vindictive. It is customary to lament this act of fanatical tyranny, but a sudden death stroke at least saved the glorious age from simply petering out. The best days of the Cavalier drama were long behind. If we must criticise the policy that put it out of its misery, we can only lament that the Roundheads, instead of closing the theatres, did not decide to give us a Roundhead drama for a change.

IV. THE AFTERMATH CALLED RESTORATION

It was not really death at all—rather an operation necessitating a prolonged period of relative inactivity, which, as it happened, gave the patient a new lease of life. The Cavalier spirit was no more killed by the suppression of its traditional histrionic outlet than by the axe that severed the head of its reigning symbol. The existing theatres would probably have closed for all effective purposes without the intervention of Parliament, for its denizens, Royalist to a man, were ready enough to serve their king in the field of action proper. But peace or war, theatres or no theatres, drama never quite dies. For fourteen years it was without a home in England. No church opened its portals to receive a prodigal offspring that might well have turned over a new leaf, or at least have returned an old one. Plays continued to be produced sporadically and privately in Royalist circles by refugee groups of players; and drama issued in increasing volume from the printing-press, encouraging a habit of reading plays that presently grew into a fashionable craze, to be superseded only by the vogue of the eighteenth-century novel. Regular stage history has no

single item to record between the years 1642 and 1656, and the effect of this hiatus was a definite snapping of the theatrical tradition. The clouds lifted on a new London, with Bankside left in the shade; the home of a generation of fervent Cavaliers without a Cavalier training—Cavaliers (or Conservatives) who had just made a revolution. There are capacities in which every man is a Conservative; his digestion is conservative, and enforces his allegiance for the ritual of eating and drinking. So, too, with the ritual of theatrical fare. The English public was never so self-consciously conservative as in the ardour with which, reacting from the régime of the Commonwealth, it clamoured for the good old days and the good old ways; but where the senses were concerned—the theatrical sense in particular—there was no foundation of personal experience from which the passion to conserve could derive impetus, and so the reactionary became pioneer in spite of himself. One important reform, almost immediately instituted, illustrates the point. There was no reason why women's parts should not, in Shakespeare's day—or, for that matter, in the preceding Tudor age—have been played, and ably played, by women; no reason, unless prejudice (which is one side of tradition) be accounted a reason. There must have been ample feminine talent among the old irregular troupes of variety artistes whose partial initiation into the mystery of the interlude player had so drastically diverted the trend of the drama; but there was never any question of enlisting that talent: public opinion would not have countenanced so violent a break with the ecclesiastical convention that clung about the least and lewdest of its stage pieces. It was a matter of habit rather than of principle. The reopening of the theatres involved a reopening of the question. In the upshot, male impersonators of female parts were adjudged unnecessary, even objectionable, and the professional actress stepped into the breach without

any fuss, making herself indispensable almost from the beginning.

The moving spirit in the revival of dramatic activity, Sir William Davenant (1605-1668), was himself a veteran poetaster, a link, if a very loose link, with the old theatre. Under the first Stuart kings, he had distinguished himself in contributions to the precious Court masque. Already before the restoration of Charles II. he had obtained leave to present some compositions of his own in emulation of the latest Continental novelty, the Italian opera. How this bastard art found favour and developed native offshoots in the form of Ballad Opera and Comic Opera belongs to another story. Davenant's enterprise, inspired by foreign models, culminated in the establishment of two licensed playhouses, the originals of Covent Garden and Drury Lane, artificially lighted and equipped with the modern proscenium that completes the break with the traditions of the Elizabethan apron-stage. New and compelling influences from abroad obscured from the first, if they did not obliterate, the memory of the old Bankside regime. While in England monarchy and drama alike had been temporarily under eclipse, a genius among kings, Louis XIV. of France, was cultivating, under his personal supervision, that essentially exclusive product—the neo-classical, heroic drama of Corneille. The master's "arrival" with *Le Cid* in 1636, twenty years after the death of Shakespeare, some nine months before the death of Ben Jonson, ushered in the great epoch of the French Theatre. And as the French Court was the natural focus of English Royalist aspirations, its drama was accepted as a model for all patriotic promoters of Restoration revelry. In French eyes the Elizabethan drama was irretrievably damned by its deliberate violation of the law and order of the academic Hellenic. We have seen how this very issue had been fought out in the days that preceded the

emergence of Marlowe, and how the classicists had been routed by sheer weight of popular taste. Popular taste was no longer the criterion in a theatreland consisting of two monopolised and ultra-fashionable houses, with corresponding prices of admission. The plebeian spectator (in so far as he was privileged to join the charmed circle) was disposed to defer to the judgment of his social betters, especially as his own marked predilection for vulgar fare was indulged by continual revivals of old favourites. The poets conformed religiously to the mood and mode of the Court. For the first decade of the new era, we may learn almost everything worth learning about the contemporary theatre from the impressions of that naïve and catholic playgoer, Samuel Pepys. During the years of his Diary (1659-1669), he reports performances of twelve of Shakespeare's plays, twenty-seven plays of which Fletcher was sole or part author, seven of Ben Jonson's, eight of Shirley's, and a number of other minor Elizabethan works. He saw during the same period five translations from Corneille, and for new native fare of note, several "heroic tragedies," in imitation of Corneille, by John Dryden (1631-1700), the first official poet laureate and the outstanding literary figure of the age. If the old Adam had to be appeased by Elizabethan revivals, Dryden was determined that for the future, at any rate, English dramatists would never again make themselves ridiculous (in Versailles) by resorting to the laxity of form and content that had satisfied the old Globe audiences. If this sounds incredible, we can only refer the reader to Dryden's explicit apology for the plays of his predecessors in a preface to one of his own: "Malice and partiality set apart, let any man who understands English, read diligently the works of Shakespeare and Fletcher, and I dare undertake that he will find in every page either some solecism of speech or some notorious flaw in sense. . . . I suppose

I need not name . . . the historical plays of Shakespeare: besides many of the rest, as the *Winter's Tale*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, which were either grounded on impossibilities, or at least so meanly written, that the comedy neither caused your mirth, nor the serious part your concernment" . . . and so on. It remains for us to remark that of the various original features with which Dryden—a great man, as men go—endowed the drama of his day, this practice of writing a preface to each play as it was published is the one that has stood him in best stead with posterity. His prefaces are still readable.

The "heroic couplet," with which he sought to improve on the free and easy blank verse of his forbears, had its hour upon the stage, and then was heard no more. His desperate endeavour to impose formality on the erratic English language may indeed be termed heroic; it was wasted. As with the dialogue, so with the texture of his plays, which, conceived in the spirit of the French Court, remain mere exercises in dramatic decorum. When we compare (as we are bound to) Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* with Dryden's handling of the same material in *All for Love*, we are left marvelling at the naïveté of the man's ambition to interpret life in terms of polite society. His tragedy was, however, to make dramatic history in another connection. *The Rehearsal* of the Duke of Buckingham mercilessly exposed the whole bag of tricks; and a century later was transformed by Sheridan into *The Critic*, perhaps the funniest play in the English language.

A cause of mirth in others, Dryden is for us less successful as a comic poet on his own account. Aiming higher than the more famous comic dramatists of the age, his pieces, though freely leavened with both wit and obscenity, suffer from a self-conscious addiction to a hypothetical refinement, producing continual jars on our enjoyment. We prefer the wit and obscenity

undiluted, or at any rate blended with more congenial concomitants, as in the more representative writers of the Comedy of Manners, presently to be considered.

The reaction against Dryden's self-styled Reformation of the stage is marked in the work of the dramatic poets who emerge in the years following the close of Pepys' diary. The case against the Elizabethans was gradually exploded. To put the clock back was another kind of problem. A mediocrity, Thomas Shadwell (1640-1692), who succeeded to the laureateship, forfeited by Dryden at the Revolution, aspired to institute a new Jonsonian comedy of humours. His *Bury Fair*, the best of a series of regular annual tributes to the master, is attractive enough in its way, but comedy was settling into a new groove, and he laboured in vain. Tragedy never really settled anywhere. Both Thomas Otway (1652-1685) and Nathaniel Lee (1653-1692), after commencing in the pseudo-classic-heroic vein, were drawn irresistibly into the old ways, and their more successful works were written in frank emulation of the form, as well as in the blank verse, of the pre-Civil War theatre. Through them, as through Nicholas Rowe (1674-1718), who followed them, the back-wash of the great age throws up its last masterpieces. Otway's *Venice Preserved* is pure Elizabethan. His *Orphan* and Lee's *Cæsar Borgia*, if less pure, are also less decadent than many of the plays that had preceded the close of the period to which they properly belonged. Rowe's *Jane Shore* and *Lady Jane Grey*, fine plays both of them, are almost Victorian in feeling, and the Elizabethan technique has been subtly metamorphosed before its effacement in the deluge that followed.

On the other side of the Channel, the mantle of Corneille had fallen on Racine, in default of an English candidate, but the *entente cordiale* was strengthened by the emergence, under the same

benign Royal patronage, of a comic genius, more infectious and more cosmopolitan in appeal, indeed the Good European *par excellence*. Molière's humanistic transfiguration of the old Roman comedy was the admitted model alike of Goldoni in Italy, of Holberg in Denmark, and of Griboyedov in Russia. That our own comic poets of the period derived inspiration from the same source can hardly be disputed, although the extent of the obligation remains a matter of dispute. Sir George Etherege (1636-1694), whose *Love in a Tub* (1664) is generally regarded as the first Comedy of Manners, was certainly one of the earliest admirers of Molière, just as certainly as he was steeped in the old cavalier spirit of Ben Jonson and Fletcher. It is claimed by John Palmer in his book *The Comedy of Manners* that the school initiated by Etherege is as distinct from the one as from the other influence by virtue of a subjective element, a trick of endowing the central character or characters with the author's own personality—real or affected—and so of conveying his particular reaction to the society in which he moved, and to the limits of which his comedy is restricted. Molière's characters, to be sure, were carefully selected types; so, we have seen, were the representative "humours" of Ben Jonson. But we have also seen that Elizabethan comedy in general, and Fletcher's in particular, achieved its most striking effects precisely from a distinctive personal bias, functioning, however, for the most part in brilliantly imaginative settings, and expanded to embrace almost unlimited relations with life. When Etherege initiates us into cultured leisured English society after the Restoration, we are charmed to discover a piece of genuine "period," preserved for all time, as is the life of Elizabethan London in the cycle of realistic comedies noticed in the previous section. When *Love in a Tub* is followed by *She would if she could* (1667), our delight is intensified by the increasing cunning of the process, and (need we

say?) we are tickled by the novelty of a prurience more refined (in the literal sense of the word) than the naïve salacity of the older dramatists. In William Wycherley (1640-1715) the art is developed on all sides. *Love in a Wood* (1671) is followed by two free adaptations from Molière, *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*. The dialogue and (within its restricted range) the characterisation are here positively dazzling in their brilliance, but, with all allowance for the "manliness" of their author, Mr. Horner, of the former play, and Mr. Manly, of the latter, are a pair of cads, if the word has any meaning in our dictionary. Wycherley's best is surpassed by the best of William Congreve (1670-1729). *The Way of the World* (1700) has a perfection of style that makes it, from whatever standpoint it is viewed, one of the great plays of the English language. But before we have reached it by way of his earlier plays, *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, and *Love for Love*, and of the robuster plays—notably *The Provoked Wife*—of Sir John Vanbrugh (1666-1726), the freshness has worn off, the pattern has become monotonous. If we obtain an occasional glimpse into an unhappy, but at least a human situation, it is straightway turned with a witty line—as in Sir John Brute's "Why did I marry? I married because I had a mind to lie with her, and she would not let me"—whence we pass on to the next witty line: "Why did you not ravish her?" with its train of further laughs. The early cuckoo enchants us, but we grow impatient of his notes long before the end of the season; even so, we weary of these caged songsters' everlasting cuckoldoodledum. We are tired of the sniggering, posturing crew of good-for-nothings—the truewits and the dapperwits and the semi-wits, and their butts, and their animal mistresses and their pathological hoydens; of their *risqué* jests and gibes that, long before Queen Anne is dead, have become chestnuts. We pine for the freedom of the Eliza-

bethans, to whom manners were mere "humours"; for whom Mirabel and Millamant (the beaux ideals of the new school) would have been a pair of nice lovers, of subsidiary interest to some tale of arresting human interest.

In their defence we must remember that none of these writers really took himself seriously, or regarded his art as more than a kind of social accomplishment. Etherege was conspicuously of Horseback Hall. Wycherley's ambition was satisfied by the conquest of one of Charles II.'s mistresses by means of an audacious ditty in his first play. Vanbrugh was by profession an architect—as it happens, a great one. Congreve, on being informed that Voltaire wished to call on him to pay his respects, insisted that he would be visited on no other footing than as a gentleman. On the failure of *The Way of the World*, he vowed he would write no more plays and, though he survived for twenty-nine years, he kept his vow.

George Farquhar (1678-1707), the last of the line, has been accused of killing the Comedy of Manners by insinuating a degree of morality into an essentially immoral art-medium. He was the traitor that sold the pass. At least, he might have been tempted to do so. Unlike his predecessors, he was dependent on his pen for the maintenance of a home. He died at the age of thirty, leaving a beloved wife and child without a penny. Difficult indeed it must have been, with the wolf at the door, to sustain the note of irresponsible swagger throughout five acts of ado about nothing. Whatever the cause, the "pert, low" fellow, with his Irish temperament, did undoubtedly betray some genuine feeling, if not too much. It is more to the point that he let fresh air into the theatre. Towards the end of the late war, the (London) Stage Society, by an inspiration, gave a performance of his first play, *The Recruiting Officer*, and those who were present will not easily forget the clean sweep it made of the

cobwebs of multitudinous cares, and particularly the exhilarating effect of its country scenes and characters. There is something of the same hearty quality in parts (only) of his second best play, *The Beaux Stratagem*. If we must shed tears over Farquhar, let it not be for the æsthetic shortcomings of his brief and infinitely promising achievement.

But the Comedy of Manners was doomed before Farquhar appeared on the scene. The shrill voice of the Puritan, stifled in the prolonged mafficking of the Restoration, had become articulate in Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*, issued broadcast in 1698.* Unlike Prynne's ill-fated diatribe, it was relatively brief and to the point, and the response was immediate and epoch-making—or, more accurately, epoch-unmaking. Playgoers rubbed their eyes as though awakened from some Puck-inspired freak of hallucination. The dramatists, surprised into a stammering self-consciousness, knew not which way to turn in self-defence. They might as well have spared their efforts to turn in any direction. The tide of public opinion had turned, irresistibly to submerge them. Once again the Roundheads were masters of the situation. Once again, alas, the Roundhead genius neglected to take advantage of that situation.

The first golden opportunity of capturing the theatre for spiritual purposes had been lost when the Roundheads had chosen to suppress the theatre. The results of that policy were to be discerned perhaps in the excesses that followed the inevitable restoration of the theatre, which excesses had, in turn, provoked this fresh mobilisation of outraged public opinion. A second closure was hardly a matter of practical politics. The power behind Collier may, however, be said to

* The more impressive in that Collier was not a Puritan at all, but a Tory and a High Churchman.

have effected more lasting damage than the Puritans of the Long Parliament. The hated theatre had been discredited, was in disruption. The enemy—the essential enemy—left the theatre to stew in its own juice : which it did for the best part of the succeeding two hundred years.

CHAPTER III

THE RESTORATION OF ROUNDHEAD DRAMA

I. INTERREGNUM

It would be fanciful to pretend that Puritanical resistance, whether active or passive, provided the sole or even the major grounds of the slump that followed the collapse of the last great Cavalier effort in dramatic self-expression. At first glance, it would certainly appear that, so far from repudiating the inevitably chastened theatre,* the Puritans, through the agency of artistic mediocrities, actually facilitated its descent to bathos. Moral plays were not wanting in the reaction that followed Jeremy Collier's *Short View*. Those who witnessed Mr. Nigel Playfair's recent revival (1927) of Lillo's celebrated *George Barnwell* (1731) will have appreciated a nice adjustment between artistic, ethical and box-office principles. Better plays of the same school have passed more completely into oblivion; plays of competent workmanship, occasional sincerity, even earnestness, but utterly lacking inspiration. The one play of the period that did not lack inspiration, Addison's *Cato* (1714), achieved a record run by reason of its appositeness to current political issues—much as, by a similar chance, a fine modern play, *Abraham Lincoln*, succeeded in spite of its merits. *Cato* (pace most modern

* By the theatre we mean, of course, the theatrical management. The Comedy of Manners was dead. An alternative drama had to be manufactured, failing a spontaneous supply.

stage historians) might, in a more generous social environment, have inaugurated a new school of English tragedy. It proved a mere flash in the pan. Its Roman body went marching on through innumerable doggerel *réchauffés*, while its soul dissolved into the elements.

Perhaps it is not for us to assign causes for the ebbs any more than for the flows in the art tides. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. One explanation of the decline in question has at least the virtue of deserving to be the truth, and the appearance of presenting at least a facet of the truth. Henry Fielding, a literary genius of the supreme order—the first to appear since Shakespeare—made his mark as a playwright of budding ideas and ideals. His playwriting activity, with its promise of a new era in English drama, was abruptly checked by a Government whose notorious corruption was challenged by those ideas and ideals. The Licensing Act of 1737, establishing the stage censorship that is still in force, was rushed through for the specific purpose. Fielding, effectually banished from the stage, embarked on the less hazardous highway of narrative fiction, encouraged by the sensational success of Richardson's *Pamela*, and founded a dynasty of great novelists. Imaginative writers followed his lead, as, before him, they had followed Shakespeare's. This is not the place to enter into the question of the comparative merits of the novel and the play, but it may not be irrelevant to point out that the form of the novel was no more a novelty in the time of Fielding than in the time of Shakespeare. Shakespeare, with a wide reading, not alone of English fiction from Chaucer to Lodge but of continental *novelli*—sufficiently attested by his pickings from them—elected the play for his medium and found it adequate for all his purposes. If we are not justified in conjecturing how far he might have been tempted into other paths under the provocation that occasioned Fielding's de-

fection, we are at least justified in submitting the facts and pointing the implications.

Drama as a live force died out. The theatres carried on. Failing the dramatist, interest in the stage was kept alive by the players, and for that we should be duly grateful to the players. We are a little grudging in our gratitude. Are the mice to blame for the cats' absence? Perhaps not, but we may deplore their devastating incursions into the cats' preserves. As the text of Shakespeare was mutilated for the aggrandisement of the bully Bottoms that ruled the theatre during the period under survey, so new plays were fashioned to meet their exclusively histrionic requirements. To the old moral obloquy that had been the heritage of the dramatists from the time of Marlowe, was gradually added a new kind of prejudice—an intellectual contempt; the notion that playwriting is a mere knack, to be acquired by any fool with the sort of happy accident that enables a man to dabble in sleight-of-hand or ventriloquism.

If we seem to be drifting into a discussion of the contemporary theatre it is only because, in essential features, the West End London stage of to-day has changed very little from the stage described by Colley Cibber (1671-1757) in his ingenuous apology for a theatrically significant but dramatically negligible career, or from the stage satirised by Sheridan some years later in *The Critic*. Sir Fretful Plagiary wrote tragedies because the actor-managers of Sheridan's day still liked to feature themselves as heroes of pseudo-Elizabethan melodramas.

Sheridan himself (1751-1816), in his famous trilogy of masterpieces, and Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) in the equally famous *She Stoops to Conquer*—posthumous issue of the neo-Restoration comedy of Farquhar—provided the only considerable dramatic literature between the early eighteenth and the later nineteenth centuries. The perennial inquiry into what's wrong with

the theatre dates from the Jeremy Collier period, and not, as is popularly supposed, from a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. It was not originally a mere silly-season topic. Students of drama must have felt indeed that all was lost when the divorce between poetry and drama was, as it were, made absolute by the emergence of the "dramatic poem" and the "poetic drama," whereby the author sought to distinguish his work, for the information of the cultured public, from the kind of piece that merely ministered to the virtuosity of popular stage players. It would have been a little awkward to explain to an Elizabethan exactly what was meant by a "play for the study." These freak products of *émigré* drama, without which the collected editions of most of our great poets are obviously not complete, tell their own story. There are scenes in Byron's *Manfred* that touch the heights of great drama, to descend abruptly into passages that no earthly audience could sit out, and, while we may try to believe on principle that, but for the folly of the censor, Shelley's *Cenci* could be relied upon to "bring the house down," we must confess on a closer searching of the heart, that it lacks, despite its magnificent qualities, the touch of the practised playwright, the touch that a Webster or a Massinger could have supplied without mental exertion. Born in a more auspicious age, what might not Browning and Swinburne have given to the theatre! Their adventures on a Tom Tiddler's ground, ruled, in fealty to their Lordships of the Theatre, by a Mrs. Inchbald and a Sheridan Knowles, belong to the chronicles of square pegs in round holes.

With Stephen Phillips (1868-1915) we are already on the threshold of the new era. After a sudden and short vogue (to the credit of Beerbohm Tree), he was cold-shouldered out of a theatre that is not yet ready for a poetry distinguishable from fat parts for actor-managers.

The body of this interregnum drama, to be studied in its due perspective, should be read (assuming our eyesight is equal to the strain) in the format of a series in which it was preserved for the benefit of stage-devotees. *Dick's Penny Plays*, a folded broadsheet, closely filled in microscopic type, provides an appropriate setting for the tags and gags of the pre-Robertsonian theatre. It is difficult for us in these days to realise the measure in which the earlier pioneers of our now renascent drama had to pay for this legacy of penny dreadfuls. It is recorded of the late W. S. Gilbert, a considerable man of letters in his way, that he was apt to take offence on being classified as a "playwright," instead of the more dignified "dramatist"—a pathetic symptom of the inferiority complex produced by nearly two centuries of a patently inferior drama.

II. REGENERATION

SIR WILLIAM: Sit down, Trafalgar. This gentleman is about to read a comedy. A cheer! (*Testily*) Are there no cheers here! (*Rose brings a chair.*) Sit down.

MISS GOWER (*sitting, bewildered*): William, is all this—quite—?

SIR WILLIAM: Yes, Trafalgar, quite in place—quite in place. (*To TOM, referring to GADD and COLPOYS, who swagger in at the door*) Friends of yours?

TOM: Yes, Sir William.

SIR WILLIAM: Sit down (*imperatively*). Sit down and be silent. (*GADD and COLPOYS seat themselves on the sofa, like men in a dream. ROSE sits on the dress basket.*)

AVONIA (*opening the door slightly—in an anxious voice*): Rose——

SIR WILLIAM: Come in, ma'am, come in! (*AVONIA, still in her pantomime dress, enters*) Sit down, ma'am, and be silent!

(*AVONIA sits beside ROSE, next to MISS GOWER.*)

MISS GOWER (*in horror*): Oh-h-h-h!

SIR WILLIAM (*restraining her*): Quite in place, Trafalgar, quite in place. (*To Tom*) Now, Sir!

TOM (*opening his manuscript and reading*): *Life, a Comedy* by Thomas——

Quite in place, this curtain scene from Sir Arthur Pinero's ever-memorable *Trelawney of the Wells*; and the missing word is "Robertson." Thomas Robertson (1829-71) brought our drama triumphantly out of the long tunnel into the daylight of life. Not the full daylight; this had to be accomplished by stages. In Robertson we view the daylight through rose-coloured windows. Quite in place that the achievement should be celebrated by one who so ably and loyally carried on the good work; quite in place that the portrait should be executed in the master's own manner, against a background of true love destined to live happily ever after. There is another, a later, manner in which the story might have been treated with greater fidelity to historical fact. John Galsworthy, who actually carried Robertson's technique to its logical conclusion, has ventured to "place" poor Tom, with an irony that seems a little unkind, by the ingenious interpolation (in *The Eldest Son*) of a scene from *Caste*, in rehearsal by a company of patrician amateurs, among whom the problem of Caste is resolving itself in the light of real life. Robertson's own real life was anything but a fairy tale. Success came to him only after a heart and health breaking gripd. It is fashionable to ridicule his work. We know so much better these days. He did not labour in vain.

There is an irresistible charm about his plays, which, like all good plays, read well, despite the shorthand abracadabra of stage directions in which the printed dialogue is embedded. The characters convey something of the naïveté of figures in Dresden porcelain.

Every now and then they lapse into lifelessness. We become conscious of a first-class compartment that jolts a little dangerously in the morning twilight . . . and of the effort of keeping natural after such ages and ages in that horrid tunnel, with the fumes still about the throat. . . . Till presently they open their eyes, the breath returns, and we have another joyous little prattle over the cups and saucers. . . . The last of them, *War* (1871), was a fiasco. (The reality of the Franco-Prussian War exposed the obvious limitations of his art.) Tom, aged forty-one, was on his death-bed, but the cause was winning all along the line. What cause? it may be asked. Perfect Propriety *cum* Romance in the middle of the reign of Queen Victoria: Coals in Newcastle! The cause was Naturalism in the Theatre, and it was a hard-won victory of the first round. Both the Romance and the Propriety were to go by the board before the final victory—if indeed any victory in the theatre is final.

Arthur Wing Pinero consolidated the gains, and was joined presently by a young hothead, Henry Arthur Jones, fresh from an early triumph in the enemy's camp. They carried the Old Guard of dramatic critics along by easy progressions in light comedy and satire. "Only a simple story of London life . . . only a tale of man's sure trust and woman's gentle confidence . . . with its alternate ripples of honest laughter and its tears of sympathy, with its genuine humour and its wholesome, manly sentiment," cooed Clement Scott, the *doyen* of the circle, referring to *Sweet Lavender*. Side by side, feeling their way carefully, the pair gradually extended their scope. The seamy side of romance was exhibited in Jones's *Saints and Sinners* (1884) and Pinero's *Profligate* (1889), plays that ought to have been melodramas, but somehow were not. The conventions of melodrama were presently discarded altogether. The common-places of the "advanced" novel transferred to the

realistic stage settings of Tom Robertson, discussed in unequivocal language, produced a tremendous sensation. The Old Guard, with a new sense of responsibility, pronounced them daring, and added a caution. "Daring" was the word that echoed at every late-Victorian dinner-table. Pinero and Jones found themselves in the full glare of our modern limelight. Oscar Wilde (1856-1900) kept them company for a while before giving full rein to his irresponsible genius in the immortal comedy of late Victorian manners, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jones went "all out" for the sins of society in *Judah* (1891). Pinero countered three years later with *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, a sentimental-serious, psychological study of erring womanhood. A leap in the dark, but it landed him in safety. Jones, seeking in his turn to go one better, was not so fortunate. In *Michael and His Lost Angel*, certainly a better play than Pinero's, he overstepped the mark. A minister of the Church of England, succumbs to the charms of another man's wife, confesses his sin from the pulpit (a stage pulpit!), but does not quite whole-heartedly repent it. "Daring" in sex was one thing: "Hands off Religion!" thundered the Old Guard. There were two dissentients. One was William Archer; the other his friend "G. B. S." of *The Saturday Review*. Their voices carried no weight against the clamour; the play was withdrawn after ten performances. Jones tried desperately to retrieve his *faux pas*. Did the public favour vainly repentant female sinners? He would give them a *Defence of Mrs. Dane* every whit as stimulating as Pinero's *Woman Killed with Kindness*; disclose a "past," nay, a single slip, under poignantly extenuating circumstances, bearing a retribution immeasurably more cruel than mere death. Pinero, with his finger-ends on the public pulse, went from triumph to triumph. A discreet experiment with a religious *motif* might have served as an object lesson to his rasher rival. *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* is

not only an adulteress, but an atheist to boot. In a climax of moral abandon she deliberately hurls a Bible into the fire. But it does not stay there. A minute later, in the nick of time, she is grovelling before the grate to bring down the curtain on the rescue of—her author's reputation. The experiment was not repeated. The same "G. B. S." became curiously eloquent on the subject of Mrs. Ebbsmith, and his word was beginning to carry weight, at least with the *intelligentsia*. Pinero took the hint, and returned to the more congenial Divorce Courts.

But "G. B. S." would not let that Bible alone. It was excessively bad form, and, after all, he was only a dramatic critic, but the perverse fellow kept declaring that he was on the side of Mr. Jones's "lost angel" and Mr. Pinero's atheist, and that these "new" English dramatists were not worthy to tie the shoelatchets of an obscene foreigner, Henrik Ibsen by name, whose plays Mr. William Archer was just then diligently translating; finally and paradoxically (as it sounded) and with great earnestness, he declared that Bunyan was Better Than Shakespeare. The man in the street found it a little difficult to reconcile these pronouncements. Unashamed blasphemy in itself was intelligible and familiar. But what had Bunyan to do with such a cause? Bunyan had everything to do with it. To appreciate the significance of the Shavian revolution it is only necessary to re-orientate the position of the old Cavalier and Roundhead parties under the altered social conditions of the late nineteenth century. The *bête noire* of the Puritan had ever been Conformity, or, in more modern parlance, Respectability. Conformity in the days of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs, apart from its political implication, was all of a piece with the lax morals celebrated in the Elizabethan and neo-Elizabethan dramas. Conformity in the Victorian era involved at least lip-service to the domestic virtues, the seventh commandment in par-

ticular, and so absorbed a good deal of the original non-conformist element. The Respectable Victorian found himself confronted with a dual opposition—on the one hand, the unprincipled old sinners, and, on the other, the ultra-principled pioneers of the Higher Life; and one of his weaknesses was an apparent inability to distinguish between the two. To be a free-thinker—and, by consequence, a free-lover—was in the eyes of the (respectable) world to put oneself in the company of profligates, moral degenerates, and “outsiders” generally. This free-thinking Puritanism, derived from Shelley, and, stimulated under pressure of social problems arising out of modern industrialism, had produced a militant humanitarianism (embracing feminism, socialism, and the “isms” generally) that was ever seeking new ways of reaching the conscience of the public; and that ultimately discovered the drama by the same sure instinct that guided the makers of the early Mystery drama (and of the earlier Mysteries that developed into Greek tragedy). It was a religious impulse without denomination, and it cut clean across the traditions of the commercial theatre. Those who were not for it were against it. Pinero’s attitude was that of the ordinary English gentleman. Jones was a representative of the progressive side of Victorianism. Both alike were untouched by the spirit that had found expression in the plays of Ibsen, the originator of this new religious drama. Shaw had commenced his career as politician: politics were not wide enough to contain his passion for a better world. The outburst of vituperation that greeted Ibsen in England determined his choice of medium.* “An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly;

* By one of Time’s revenges, he had previously embarked on the career of a novelist, following the precedent established by Fielding for creative writers of the first order.

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a lazar-house with all its doors and windows open," raved a transfigured Clement Scott, after the first performance of *Ghosts*. It was an eye-opener for "G. B. S." "The unpleasant play's the thing whereby to touch the conscience," he must have murmured, and promptly gave us *Widowers' Houses*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and *The Philanderer* (complete with caricature of Clement Scott), throwing in by way of relief some "pleasant" plays, including the "Pre-Raphaelite" (he meant pre-John Heywoodian) *Candida: A Mystery*. The first mystery of the secular theatre.

III. SHAW AND COUNTER-SHAW

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the Shavian clarion was first sounded. Tom Robertson and his services to the stage have long since faded from the playgoer's memory. Indeed, the public is already beginning to forget, not Shaw (the public is beginning to know him), but the reforms we owe to the barrage of criticism, continuing over many years, with which he prepared the way for his assault of the citadel, in the capacity of a creative artist. Some, still living, have neither forgotten nor forgiven. As late as 1914, "A Playwright of the Past," a man honoured in his generation, could write: "Mr. Shaw cannot be passed by with a bow and a smile. It were rank treachery and cowardice to be polite to him. He is a public danger. He is out to destroy, and must be destroyed."

If Robertson served as a vacuum-cleaner on the material side, Shaw has swept the spiritual atmosphere of the drama. The process is still at work, imperceptibly. The Pinero-Jones school continues to function, thanks to the breadth and adaptability of the technique elaborated by its founders, and extended by assimilation in the lively minds of an H. H. Davies,

an Alfred Sutro and a Somerset Maugham. Mr. Maugham, indeed, not infrequently leavens his comedies with a tincture of Shavian ideology, with incongruous results. For the Shaw and the pre-Shaw are as the proverbial East and West.* The criterion is the simple one of intention. The objective of the orthodox dramatist is the box-office, *via* sex appeal. Shaw and his followers, while not indifferent to practical considerations, are moved by a religious impulse. The ultimate greatness of Shaw lies in his uncompromising integrity of purpose. His relations with the theatre may be expressed in the familiar adage about Mahomet and the mountain. Gifted with a more dazzling and penetrating wit than was ever known before, he could hardly have remained unknown indefinitely. In an idiom of his own, irresistible to the ear, he delivered, as he continues to deliver, his message. Accepted as a crank or (alternatively) a charlatan, but certainly no bore, the theatre offered to meet him halfway. He held his ground. The Court Theatre capitulated (1904-1907). Disdaining to ingratiate himself, he despatched his audience with *Getting Married*. Three years later the Duke of York's Theatre waited on him. He bestowed his blessing in the yet more forbidding shape of *Misalliance*. This determined refusal to cater for the people's mere entertainment has characterised his policy from first to last. His occasional lapses into pot-boilers or tomfooleries (meaning pieces however slightly flavoured with the elements of popular appeal) have invariably been atoned for by extravagantly uncommercial experiments. So *Pygmalion*—an aberration for the benefit of Beerbohm Tree—was followed by *Heartbreak House*, and sweet *St. Joan* by an acidulated "metabiological pentateuch."

* The honest comedy of St. John Hankin may be admitted as a borderline case.

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The mountain remains a mountain still, and Mahomet remains Mahomet.

What of the followers of Mahomet?

To pursue the allegory, on all sides of the mountain, little hillocks are raising themselves in the name of Mahomet. . . .

The first English Repertory Theatre was founded by Miss Horniman in Manchester on September 23rd, 1907. It collapsed during the war. Since the war, under the initiative of Sir Barry Jackson, of Birmingham, this original enterprise has given place to a movement which was aptly related to the general situation in a recent front-page article of *The Times Literary Supplement* (July 28th, 1927).*

"A student of the drama is to-day embarrassed by contradictions. He sees outside the commercial theatres of London abundant evidence of experimental activity, but inside them, except on rare occasions, a condition near to death. . . . A playgoer who looks down the current list of plays will find that nearly all ask to be visited in the same uncritical mood in which we turn the leaves of a magazine found in a railway train. . . . If there were no evidence but this, a student might well despair; but when he looks beyond the box-offices, he finds everywhere the outward signs of a dramatic renaissance. Throughout the country unprofessional organisations are encouraging young writers and building up a critical, instructed audience. Many provincial towns have repertory companies of genuine distinction. In London itself, beneath the shadow of the commercial playhouses, experiments are being made, regularly and with revolutionary ardour, by men and women who command a stage scarcely larger

* The article is anonymous, but a discerning reader will recognise the hand and mind of Mr. Charles Morgan, the dramatic critic of *The Times*.

than a pocket-handkerchief. Leagues, societies and clubs, some useful, some extravagant, but all inspired by enthusiasm for the drama, spring up everywhere, from the mountains of Wales to the suburbs of Glasgow; and printed plays appear, and are read, as never before in the history of publishing."

It has been our endeavour to account for this phenomenon. We are to consider, in the brief space that remains, the main features of the contemporary (uncommercial) drama. After Shaw, the outstanding figure is John Galsworthy.* Both these dramatists enjoy an international reputation. Galsworthy "arrived" in the third year of the Court Theatre season with *The Silver Box*, a masterly exposure of the cruelty of our social system, conceived not at all as a theatrical *tour de force*, but out of the need of a spirit in travail: an impersonal spirit. The play, like the plays that followed it, has the simplicity of a prayer. Galsworthy, practically alone of "advanced" English dramatists, utters his prayer in an idiom quite unrelated to the Shavian. Technically the last word in naturalism, his plays show up the world we live in. But in the process they reveal the hand and mind of God, and that is why their place is in the repertory of the irregular theatre of the mountebank Mahomet. The occasional plays of John Masefield, more colourful, less direct, have something of the same compassionate intensity.

The first-born of Shaw by the Court Theatre, Harley Granville Barker, demonstrated in *The Voysey Inheritance* that the master's spirit could be distilled

* J. M. Barrie, certainly not forgotten, has no fixable place in the pedigree of English drama. His essence is a magic, the source of which is hidden from us, and which is like to be buried "certain fathoms in the earth" after him, although Mr. A. A. Milne has captured some of his whimsicality.

into a traditional framework, without necessarily impairing its vitality. The value of this discovery may be perceived in much of the drama that has followed, deriving from Shaw, but avoiding the fatal mistake of aping his unique individuality. Happily the "life force," so permeated, allows considerable latitude in philosophy as well as in form. Barker himself has contributed generously in quality, if not in quantity. *The Madras House* and *The Secret Life* open up each a new realm of dramatic expression. Similarly fastidious, Allan Monkhouse has contented himself with an occasional study of a kind of Shavian *Hamlet* in conflict with hard-faced society. The pure religious spirit, relieved by a sense of humour, finds expression in the work of Lawrence Housman, notably in *Little Plays of St. Francis*. John Drinkwater has made stirring chronicle plays and Halcott Glover magnificent historical plays, for Puritans, while C. K. Munro expands his message into epic parables of contemporary history. The so-called Manchester school, nurtured by Miss Horniman's enterprise, specialists in local problems in the light of a realistic *cum* Shavian idealism, produced Stanley Houghton, whose mantle descended on Harold Brighouse. St. John Ervine has enriched, and it may be said, emancipated this class of play by an infusion of colour derived from the quasi-corresponding Abbey Theatre (Dublin) school of dramatists founded by the combined labours of Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory.* J. R. Gregson, one of the apostles of the new repertory movement, continues to extend the range of this provincial drama to meet the needs of a new generation of Intellectuals. .

The needs of a new generation. . . . The one common need of every generation is Change. Change

* Considerations of space preclude any attempt to place these Irish dramatists in relation to English drama.

in spirit as well as in form. Whether or no the Roundhead drama has come to stay, it cannot hope to monopolise even the Little Theatre that it has made for itself in default of capturing the "real"—that is, the commercial—stage. The Round Head, metamorphosed in the High Brow, has already discovered the importance of not being Shavian, and a new cause invented by Gordon Craig has attracted many zealots by its mystery and its unpopularity. The cause is the "art of the theatre"—of the theatre itself regarded as an end, rather than as a means: an art, like absolute music, independent of "programme," or ulterior motive. Two poet-playwrights, Clifford Bax and Ashley Dukes, harking back to old æsthetic values, show signs of having fallen, consciously or unconsciously, under the spell of Craig's ideas. Shaw is Anti-Christ in their eyes. Yet, withal, philosophy will keep breaking into their entertainment. Bax's *Midsummer Madness* combines pungent satire with the authentic charm of the old *commedia dell'arte*. In *The Man with a Load of Mischief* Dukes reflects the revolutionary ardour of a Beaumarchais through a surface of polished euphuism.

There has been a breakaway in another direction. The drama revitalised could hardly fail to recall sooner or later its old cavalier proclivities. "I believe I'm the humble representative of a new type," asserts the puzzled playwright-hero of Miles Malleson's pre-war *Youth*. "The temperament of a Huxley, and the temperament of a Byron . . ." Of a Puritan and an Elizabethan, he means. And a Roundhead-cum-Cavalier drama is growing up, as it were, to perpetuate this time-honoured cleavage in the national character—a drama predominantly Roundhead in Malleson, predominantly romantic-Cavalier in Howard Peacey: at present hopelessly muddled in the *enfant terrible* of the family, Noel Coward.

The Continent, having absorbed our Shaw, trans-

mits new influences in exchange. The dæmonic spirit of Strindberg, another religious fanatic, completing the work of revolutionising the European theatre, commenced by Ibsen, has inspired some strange new forms of drama, including the much-abused "expressionism." Chekhov, from Russia, discovered the art of stimulating the human spirit by depressing it. These tendencies, complicated by post-war disenchantment, are reflected in the work of Hermon Ould and Sean O'Casey. Not unnaturally they have taken root more firmly in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of America. The resulting fine plays of Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill, heralding a new force in world-drama, are themselves outside the scope of this survey, but their potential influence on our common language is a relevant consideration.

The English Drama of the immediate future will depend upon the vision and the industry of the various writers we have named, and—if we may name some, of many, others—of Clemence Dane, Richard Hughes, Elizabeth Baker, Margaret Macnamara, A. J. Talbot, Benn W. Levy, G. D. Gribble; and of how many more working as yet in obscurity?

But it would be foolish as well as rash to attempt a prophecy. Our drama, by some inherent perversity, has achieved its highest flights precisely when the auspices appeared least favourable. Suffice it that the further outlook, if unsettled, is at least not unhelpful.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

OF an immense literature, Professor Allardyce Nicoll's recent "historical survey from the beginnings to the present time" is clearly indispensable to anyone who may wish to pursue the study of English Drama or of any part of it in relation to the whole. This work, *British Drama* (Harrap), contains incidentally a carefully selected bibliography, to which we refer the interested reader. Acknowledgment has been made in the course of the text to one or two other works to which the author of this essay is consciously under obligation. Such acknowledgment is due also to the editors of Volumes V. and VI. of *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (covering the drama to 1642). For analyses of modern drama, linking up the movement in this country with corresponding movements on the Continent and in America, Ashley Dukes' *The Youngest Drama* (Benn) and Professor Barrett Clarke's *A Study of Modern Drama* (Appleton) may be recommended.

A volume of Everyman's Library contains *Everyman* and eight mystery and miracle plays. Many pre-Elizabethan plays were published by the Early English Drama Society. The more famous plays of the better-known Elizabethan and Restoration dramatists are published in the Mermaid series. Plays by modern authors may be obtained by reference to any bookseller's catalogue.

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